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MLB PREVIEW 2019

TECH: The New Arms Race

BY TOM VERDUCCI P. 42

ALEX BREGMAN Is Coming for Your Feed

BY BEN REITER P. 56

Plus

EXCLUSIVE
Le'Veon Bell
Explains Himself

**NCAA
TOURNAMENT**
It's Anybody's
Dance



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MARCH 25–APRIL 1, 2019

DOUBLE ISSUE

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PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON BRUTY

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ASIA DURR

Louisville's electrifying guard takes one last shot at a title

BY BEN BASKIN

CAM-ERA READY

Cam Reddish (below) and fellow freshmen RJ Barrett, Tre Jones and Zion Williamson have Duke in prime position to win it all.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
STREETER LECKA
GETTY IMAGES

SI HAS REGIONAL COVERS THIS WEEK

Photographs by Simon Bruty (Bell, Phillies); Nils Nilsen (Padres)





▼ RECHOOSING
 ▼ SIDES

Say goodbye to the heartache of busted brackets by signing up at <https://si.rtbrackets.com> which lets you switch your picks during live games. The faster you make your new selection, the more points you'll earn. To stay on top of all the latest NCAA tournament news, subscribe to SI's newsletter, Morning Madness, which will be published daily for the duration of the Big Dance.



Seeing Reds

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED is proud to announce an exclusive agreement that will bring hundreds of hours of Liverpool content to SI's streaming network. As Sadio Mané (*above*) and the 18-time English champions chase their first top-flight title since 1990, every Reds game in all competitions will be available in its entirety on SI TV on a same-day delayed basis. This is the only U.S. streaming channel where you can see all of LFC's matches in one place. Subscribers will also have access to classic LFC games, original club documentaries, behind-the-scenes video, in-depth interviews and more. Available on the service right now: the Jan. 4, 1994 match against Manchester United that featured Liverpool's epic comeback from a 3-0 deficit, as well as two classic installments of the Merseyside Derby.

The LFC programming complements the channel's existing soccer offerings, such as the acclaimed documentary series *Exploring Planet Fútbol* and the weekly studio show *Planet Fútbol*, both featuring Grant Wahl, SI's renowned soccer expert.

▼ HOW TO
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LEADING OFF

COLD RUSH

THE 47TH Iditarod sled dog race, covering 1,000 miles from Anchorage to Nome, was decided on March 13 with 39 of the initial 53 mushers still competing. The winner—in nine days, 12 hours, 39 minutes and six seconds—was Peter Kaiser, 31, of Bethel, Alaska, who became the first musher of Yup'ik descent to earn the championship. He edged the 2018 winner, Leifseth Ulsom, by 12 minutes in a race marked by unusually warm temperatures and slushy conditions. SI's Erick Rasco, cameras in hand, went along for the journey.

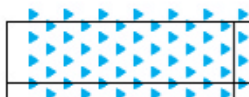
► PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERICK W. RASCO





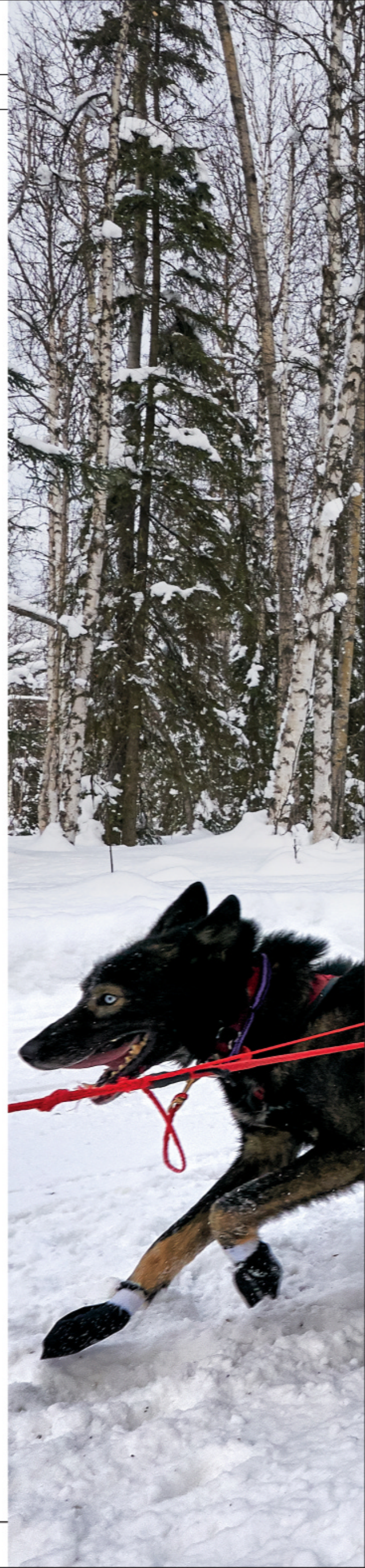
MUSH HOUR

► Charley Bejna of Addison, Ill., and his team prepared to depart the Unalakleet checkpoint, on the coast of Norton Sound, at 9:17 p.m. on the race's ninth day.

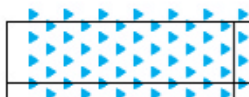


SNOW HURRY

► Travis Beals [51] slid into Nome for a fifth-place finish; Kristy Berington tended to one of her team at Unalakleet; Sarah Stokely headed out from Willow on the first leg of the Southern route.







NOME SWEET NOME

► Teams raced past parked sea planes at Rainy Pass checkpoint; a sled dog limbered up; fans were gathered at 3 a.m. to greet the winner; Kaiser posed with Lucy [near left] and Morrow after claiming his first prize (\$50,000 and a new 2019 Ram pickup).





INBOX

FOR MARCH 11, 2019



LIFE AND LEGACY

Greg Bishop's story about **Logan Boulet** and the Humboldt Broncos is one of total tragedy and total hopefulness, crafted so brilliantly that you felt as though you had been there, in person, with the wonderful subjects.

Patrick Brennen
Cedar Park, Texas

Let's hope for another Logan Effect after your story.

John Casey
Wisconsin Rapids, Wis.

I have been reading SI for more than 50 years and nothing has moved me like this story. Despite the uplifting increase in organ donations, the pain

of the families leaves me unbelievably sad. I can only imagine their absolute feeling of loss by putting my head on my son's chest to hear his heart beat.

Tom Angelucci
Berlin, N.J.

PHILLY SPECIAL

At least **Bryce Harper** didn't insult baseball fans' intelligence by saying it wasn't about the money, because his free agency most certainly was.

Richard Looten
Springfield, Mo.

BUSTED COVERAGE

As a fan of sports and as a

committed supporter of human rights, I appreciated Charlotte Shane's thoughtful article on Robert Kraft's recent arrest [SCORECARD]. Human trafficking is a terrible crime, and the perpetrators should be policed and punished. But adult, consensual sex work is labor that is also criminalized and

driven underground, creating unsafe situations for its participants, who can't call the police if they are being threatened or abused.

Megan McLemore
Jacksonville

As a law enforcement professional I totally disagree with Shane's essay. Human trafficking is very hard to

prove, so I'm sure that the police and the prosecutor are building their case carefully so that it will lead to a conviction. The women are almost always too scared to talk. Their captors have threatened them and have threatened their families. The police tactics may not have been the best, but it is often the case that we have to resort to extreme measures to catch those who do not operate within the law.

Richard Croley
Smyrna, Ga.

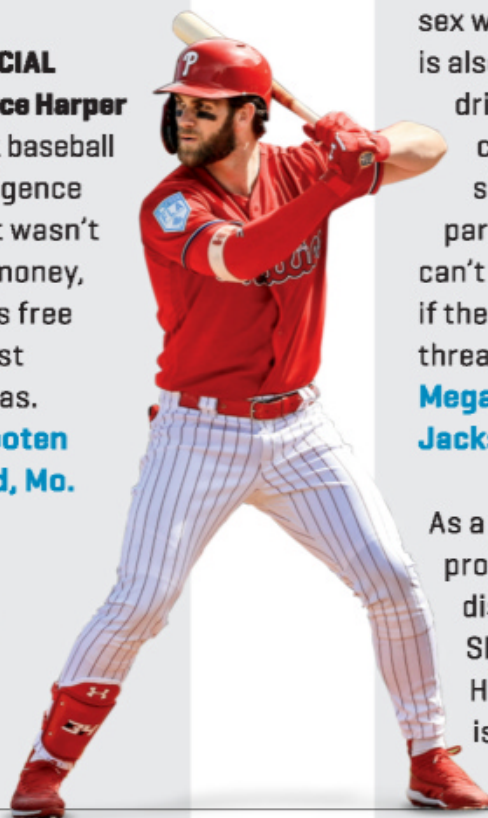


LEADING OFF

I loved the **photograph** of former MVPs Mookie Betts and Dustin Pedroia sitting with potential MVP Andrew Benintendi at Red Sox spring training. All are well less than six feet, which goes to show that you don't have to be tall to excel at baseball.

Greg Collins
West Hartford, Conn.

TODD KOROL (BOULET, COVER); MIKE EHRLANN/GETTY IMAGES (HARPER); BILLIE WEISS (REDSOX)



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STEEP PRICE

JOVAN VAVIC BUILT A WATER POLO DYNASTY AT USC—AND THE PERFECT MECHANISM TO ADMIT FRAUDULENT RECRUITS

► BY TIM ROHAN



I**N 2008**, Michael Rosenthal graduated from high school as arguably the best water polo player in Florida. A first-team All-America, he had won the state title, but, Rosenthal says, “I wasn’t a top recruit. . . . I’m not saying I was completely off the radar. But the best water polo player in Florida, in a given year, is probably an average player in California.”

The Golden State is the hotbed of American water polo. It’s where the best players come from and where the top college teams reside: Stanford, Cal, UCLA, USC. Rosenthal ultimately

chose the Trojans and their legendary coach, Jovan Vavic. You could call Vavic the John Wooden of water polo—and its Geno Auriemma, too. Since 1995, Vavic won 16 national titles (10 with the men, six with the women) and 15 National Coach of the Year awards.

That meant Vavic could recruit practically anyone he wanted, and USC would give him leeway to sign a large number, especially on the men’s side. The NCAA mandates that teams can only carry 16 players in the championship tournament and limits schools to 4½ scholarships for men and eight for women, to be divided



UNREAL SPORTS

As part of a massive college admissions scheme, Singer paid coaches to vouch for recruits who in some cases had never played.

however the program wants. But the NCAA does *not* have a roster limit. Often, Vavic would bring in hordes of male recruits, apparently just to see who would pan out.

In 2008, for instance, Vavic signed 22 freshmen, bumping the men's roster up to 51. Only six of those freshmen received playing time that year. The other 16, including Rosenthal, redshirted.

Now, why would Vavic carry a roster that large? Well, know this: Everything about his program had a purpose. Vavic drew from other coaches he admired: Phil Jackson. Tom Osborne. Wooden. "He'd take these philosophies," Rosenthal says, "and then put his own Eastern European water polo twist on it." After learning about his alleged involvement in the college admissions scandal, we now know his purposes weren't always above board.

Vavic, a UCLA grad and former pro in his native Yugoslavia, made players evaluate themselves in front of the

team and attend regular meditation sessions. He studied film obsessively and was constantly coming up with innovative play designs. And like many successful coaches, he was also paranoid. Vavic would practice his best plays in the summer, and then shelve them until the NCAA tournament. "We always had very specific plays, almost like a football team," says Matthew Burton, another freshman in 2008. "That was very different from a lot of the coaches in the collegiate system."

Vavic would often work with his top players at one end of the pool, while his assistants schooled the redshirts at the other. He would weed out the weaker players with his grueling practices, his grating coaching style and hours of "punishment" swims.

The redshirts who stuck around acted as the team's cheering section at games and were given odd jobs, setting up goals and filling Gatorade coolers—like ball boys, Burton says.

Vavic got results—USC's men finished their season ranked No. 1 and the women are currently No. 1—but on March 12, Vavic was arrested as part of the bribery scandal and promptly fired. He is accused of signing two fake recruits, who had never played competitive water polo, to help them get into USC, in exchange for bribes from their parents. According to an affidavit filed by federal prosecutors, Vavic worked with Donna Heinel, a USC associate athletic director, and a man named Rick Singer, who operated a college counseling business and a purported charity.

According to the affidavit, Singer would create an "athletic profile" for a student, complete with falsified stats, doctored pictures and even

fake awards. Then Vavic or Heinel, accepting money from Singer, would present the profile, along with those of actual water polo recruits, to a USC admissions subcommittee that reviewed incoming athletes.

It appears USC took Vavic at his word, not that abnormal in collegiate water polo. One former D-I coach says that when he submitted his list of recruits, his superiors just accepted it. Not every school has the time or resources to conduct background checks on small-sport recruits. There is no centralized database for water polo recruiting, either.

Vavic could be convincing too. In one case, he e-mailed a USC athletics administrator that one of these fake recruits "would be the fastest player on our team," that he could swim 50 yards two seconds quicker than his fastest. It was a total fabrication. USC admitted the student two days later.

It's unclear whether either of the fake recruits saw the pool or where the money paid on their behalf—the going rate appeared to be between \$220,000 and \$250,000—ended up. Singer allegedly made private-school tuition payments for Vavic's children. But Singer also told a parent, in a wiretapped conversation, he believed that Vavic used the money to "subsidize" the salaries of his assistants, who did so much work to keep his dynasty going. (None of Vavic's assistants have been charged.)

It seemed like the perfect crime. If one of the fake recruits left the team, no one would've noticed because of all the usual attrition. Says Burton: "I'd say there were usually five to six guys [that dropped out] every year."

Rosenthal stuck it out and played four seasons after his redshirt year; two of the other 15 who redshirted with him in 2008 completed their eligibility. They ended up leaving USC having won five consecutive national championships. □



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A LIFE REMEMBERED

DICK DALE

1937–2019

FEW, IF any, sports have a more readily identifiable culture than surfing, and occasionally its tribal elements break big. Think board shorts, bikinis and Dick Dale, the guitarist who pioneered the surf-rock genre.

Born Richard Monsour, Dale moved from Massachusetts to Southern California as a senior in high school and added a second passion, surfing, to his love of guitar. His most recognizable hit, “Miserlou,” was an old tune he learned from his Lebanese uncles. They played it on a lute-like instrument called an oud; Dale, a lefty, played it on an upside-down electric guitar, at a frenetic pace inspired by the exhilaration of catching a wave. “As I’d go out learning to surf,” he told the *Los Angeles Times* in 1988, “I’d feel the power of waves coming over my body. It’s like you’re with God.”

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NEWSMAKERS

BALL WATCHERS

INSIDE APPLE'S SPORTS SURVEILLANCE ROOM

► BY JACOB FELDMAN



I**N** A conference room on the second floor of Apple's Results Way complex in Cupertino, Calif., a dozen employees watch it all: every minute of March Madness, minor tennis tournaments, spring training baseball, college lacrosse, even curling. The team manages the sports subsection on Apple's TV app and on its Apple TV interface, keeping an eye out for newsworthy moments. With the power to send push alerts to users, who can then tune in with a tap of their screens, they're making sure that casual fans will never miss a watercooler moment again.

On a whiteboard that stretches the length of the room, there are definitions for a college basketball upset (Top 5 team losing to anyone outside the Top 10) and an NBA comeback (any team down 16 or more that cuts the lead to less than seven). But there are still decisions to make. Alert users of a triple-overtime NBA game between two lottery teams? Nope. A fourth overtime? O.K., send it.

In the process, Apple is playing sports media mediator: It can tell you what you're missing and, oh, yes, sell you the subscription to ESPN+, YouTube TV or PlayStation Vue, taking a cut along the way. Also, the thinking goes, the easier the company makes watching sports on your phone,

the more you'll watch. And the more you watch, the better iPhone you'll inevitably want.

Apple is expected to announce any day now that it is getting into the streaming business, and the company has reportedly budgeted \$1 billion for original content, including a deal with Kevin Durant's production company for a basketball drama. But don't expect the tech giant to venture into live broadcasts. Asked how much he's thinking about competing against Facebook and Amazon (both of which have begun airing games), Apple senior vice president for Internet software and services Eddy Cue says, "Not a lot, honestly."

Instead, he is focused on the mediator role: developing a personalized hub that could one day tell you what you should be watching, based on your viewing habits, favorite teams, fantasy matchups and even your betting slips. "Pretty much every game of anything is available to watch," he says.

If YouTube can offer tailored playlists and Netflix has an infinite stream of recommended content, it was only a matter of time before technology would disrupt how we consume sports. Devoting hours to watching games could be a thing of the past. Get all the drama without any of the doldrums. Introducing: RedZone for Everything. □

SCREEN TIME

The so-called Sports Ball Room at Apple headquarters monitors as many live sporting events as possible to alert users of big moments.

BROOKS KRAFT/APPLE (TOP); PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY BRYCE WOOD; MIKE LAWRIE/GETTY IMAGES, JOE ROBBINS/GETTY IMAGES, MATTHEW STOCKMAN/GETTY IMAGES (APOC); KOJIRO KINNO (TSI)

SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

► **POLICE IN OHIO, RESPONDING TO A 911 CALL REPORTING SOMEONE "YELLING, SCREAMING AND FLAILING HIS ARMS," FOUND A 17-YEAR-OLD WHO HAD JUST LEARNED THE BROWNS HAD TRADED FOR ODELL BECKHAM JR.**



THEY SAID IT

► **[A YEAR AGO] I WAS PLAYING 25K [EVENTS] IN JAPAN, AND NOW I'M—CAN I SAY THE F-WORD? NO, I CAN'T—THE EFFING CHAMPION OF INDIAN WELLS.**



► **BIANCA ANDREESCU,** the 18-year-old Canadian tennis player, who became the first woman to win the tournament as a wild card.



COLORFUL CLASSICS

UPDATED VERSIONS OF A FEW '70S-ERA FAVES HIGHLIGHT BASEBALL'S NEW LOOKS

► BY PAUL LUKAS

SOME MAJOR league tweaks are coming: limited mound visits, a single trade deadline and, to the excitement of nostalgia buffs, a return of powder-blue uniforms (2), which the Cardinals will wear for Saturday night road games. In other sartorial news:

- Derek Jeter continues to put his stamp on the Marlins, who have undergone a(nother) complete makeover. Remember your old Lite-Brite toy? That appears to have been the design inspiration for the new neon-on-black jerseys (6).
- The Indians have a new red alternate jersey (3) and snazzy All-Star Game sleeve and cap patches. One thing the Tribe won't be sporting: Chief Wahoo. The controversial logo has been shelved.
- An odd spectacle will unfold on June 29 and 30, when the Yankees and the Red Sox play in London.



They are technically Bosox home games, but MLB wants to showcase those iconic Yankees pinstripes, so both teams will wear their home whites.

- Speaking of the Bronx Bombers, newly acquired reliever Adam Ottavino (4) is about to become the first Yankee to wear number 0. (And you thought they'd retired all their single-digit numbers!)
- The Phillies' infamous solid-maroon Saturday Night Special uniform, which caused such a stir in 1979 that it was mothballed after one game, will be revived (1) on July 27—a Saturday night.
- Most teams will celebrate the 150th anniversary of professional baseball by wearing a small "MLB 150" patch on their sleeves (5) all season and on their caps on Opening Day. The lone variation is the Reds, who'll wear their own 150th anniversary patch and will also trot out a whopping 15 throwback designs from their uniform history—easily a single-season record.
- More patchwork will be found around the league, honoring the 50th anniversary of the Padres; commemorating the final season at Globe Life Park for the Rangers; and memorializing Frank Robinson (Reds, Orioles and Indians), Don Newcombe (Dodgers), and Peter Magowan and Willie McCovey (Giants).
- The days of teamwide shoe colors are over. MLB is relaxing its footwear rules so players can wear cleats in black, white, gray or their team colors.

For a more detailed rundown of all the 2019 MLB uniform changes, see SI.com.



WATCH

ACTION

Premieres March 24,
8 p.m. ET on Showtime

A new docuseries follows gamblers and bookies after last year's Supreme Court decision that struck down a federal law prohibiting sports gambling.



PLAY

MLB THE SHOW 19

Available March 26 on PS4

New to this year's edition—besides Bryce Harper in a Phillies jersey—is the chance to re-create or alter baseball lore, like Babe Ruth's calling his shot or the Cubs' winning it all in 2016.



SEE

SCREWBALL

In theaters March 29

Billy Corben, director of acclaimed *30 for 30* films *The U* and *Broke*, takes on Alex Rodriguez, Biogenesis and baseball's 2013 PED scandal in his latest documentary project.

GAMEPLAN: THE SMART FAN'S GUIDE TO RIGHT NOW

MARATHON MAN

MEB KEFLEZIGHI'S NEW BOOK HAS PLENTY OF PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR RUNNERS, BUT THE LESSONS OF HIS CAREER AREN'T JUST FOR ATHLETES



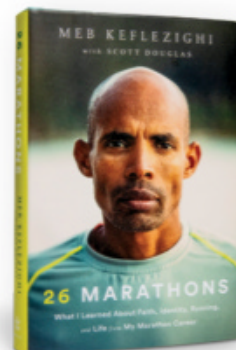
READ

26 MARATHONS: WHAT I'VE LEARNED ABOUT FAITH, IDENTITY, RUNNING, AND LIFE FROM MY MARATHON CAREER

By Meb Keflezighi, with Scott Douglas, available March 19

When Keflezighi finished his first pro marathon, in New York City in 2002, he told himself it was his last. He placed ninth, but he had struggled down the stretch. "I was cold, stiff, exhausted, and mentally drained," Keflezighi recalls in his new book.

Spoiler alert: Keflezighi, who had competed in the 10,000 at the 2000 Olympics, wasn't done running marathons, and after 25 more of them, he has plenty of wisdom to share. While the book is written for runners, others will find inspiration in its pages. At the 2014 Boston Marathon, a year after the bombings, Keflezighi—a naturalized citizen born in Eritrea—became the first U.S. man to win the race since 1983, transforming him into a symbol of American resilience. "We all have our day when everything clicks," he writes. "If you recognize when it's happening, you can produce something that's bigger than yourself." —Stanley Kay



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(SOME JUST NEVER SHOW IT)



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FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by JEREMY FUCHS



DANIELLE GIBSON

► Softball ► Murrieta, Calif.

Gibson, a sophomore infielder at Arkansas, became the second Division I player to hit for the home run cycle—a solo, two-run, three-run and grand slam—in a 15–3 win over SIU-Edwardsville. Through 21 games she is leading the team with a .448 average, six homers and 27 RBIs.



ERIC BARNETT

► Wrestling ► Greenville, Wis.

Eric, a senior at Hortonville High, earned his third consecutive WIAA Division I state title, pinning his opponent in 2:42 to take the 126-pound class. He was unbeaten (47–0) for the third season in a row, running his winning streak to 137 matches. Eric will wrestle at Wisconsin.



CAROLINE HORST

► Basketball ► Gordonville, Pa.

Caroline, a 5' 8" junior guard at Pequea Valley High, had a quadruple double in a 46–38 win over Lancaster Country Day, with 16 points, 14 rebounds, 11 blocked shots and 10 steals. She averaged 12.2 points, 10.3 boards and 4.2 assists to lead the Braves to a program-record 16 wins.



RASHARD CLARK

► Track and Field ► Los Angeles

Clark, a senior at Texas A&M-Commerce, won the 200 meters (21.09) and the 400 (47.12) and anchored the first-place 4x400 relay (3:11.40) at the Lone Star Conference championship. He was named LSC male indoor track athlete of the year for the second straight season.



MADDIE DIAB

► Gymnastics ► Glen Ellyn, Ill.

Maddie, a senior at Glenbard West High, won the all-around (38.65), uneven bars (9.55), vault (9.80) and beam (9.65) to lead the Hilltoppers to back-to-back state championships. She finished with 10 titles, including three all-arounds. Maddie will compete at Iowa State.

KEVIN SNYDER (GIBSON): COURTESY OF CHRIS HUNT (BARNETT); CHRIS HORST (HORST); EVAN LUECKE (CLARK); COURTESY OF MARK DIAB (DIAB)

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explain what went wrong
in Pittsburgh, why he sat
out all of 2018—and why
it was all worth it

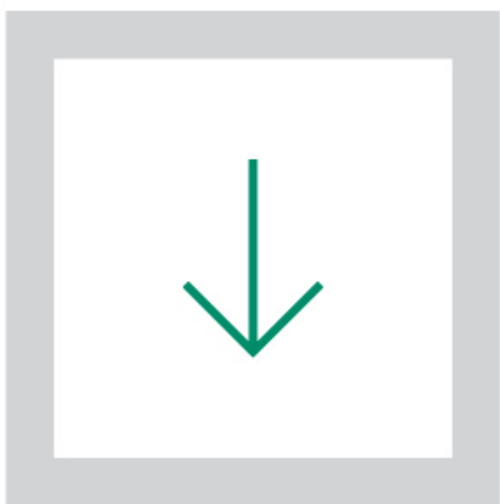




IN (ON HIMSELF)

BY JENNY
VRENTAS

PHOTOGRAPH BY
SIMON BRUTY



THE CLOCK has just passed 2 a.m., and suddenly Le’Veon Bell is standing atop a banquette at the front of the Rockwell, in South Beach. The 27-year-old running back’s arrival at the nightclub has triggered an announcement by the deejay, and soon a parade of cocktail waitresses is marching over to deliver bottles of premium liquor affixed with glimmering sparklers and a light-up sign bearing the logo of the football star’s new rap album, *Life’s a Gamble*.

The club—the type of place that doesn’t even open its doors until 11:30 on Saturday nights—has billed this evening as a) an exclusive album-release party for Bell and b) a birthday celebration for a bleached-hair, Viking-bearded millennial-influencer who goes by Mr. Miami. Any notions about this being an intimate event, though, are immediately betrayed by the hordes of spring breakers from Texas and Wisconsin looking to blow off steam.

It’s been a while since Bell has performed in front of an audience, but finally, around 3 a.m.—wearing a white graphic T-shirt, double gold chains, mirrored aviators and a Louboutin backpack and shoes—he grabs a microphone and unleashes “Free at Last,” a track he wrote about his very public and protracted contract dispute with the Steelers, which had finally come to an end days earlier.

Money is making me rude

I see that I’m in the news

And they not signing me back, but

They got to pay for it too

Bell recorded this particular song at his home, just up A1A in Aventura, during the first football season he missed in 23 years. (Or the first *entire* season, at least; he was suspended two games in 2015, for a marijuana-related arrest, and then three games in ’16, for missing drug tests, both violations of the NFL’s substance abuse policy.) Over his first five years in the pros Bell distinguished himself as one of the best players at his position. In ’17 he touched the ball a whopping 406 times (including 85 catches) for 1,946 all-purpose yards. And then, last season, he didn’t play. *At all*. In July he turned down a long-term contract offer with Pittsburgh, and he ultimately decided not to take on



the injury risk or added wear-and-tear of playing a second straight season on a one-year franchise tag.

Bell admits that when the Nov. 13 deadline to sign that \$14.5 million franchise tender and report to Steelers headquarters came and went, he stopped working out for about a month. Instead he retreated to his home recording studio, fueling his music career with the fear/thrill/charge of the gamble he was taking on his football career. Finally, on March 14—some 420 days after he last pulled on his black and gold number 26—he re-emerged with a new rap album and a new four-year, \$52.5 million contract with the Jets, including \$25 million in fully guaranteed money, a record for the position.

There’s been plenty of second-guessing of Bell’s strategy, but as he pulls the microphone close to his mouth at Rockwell and spits out lyrics of self-defense—*You want to do what I do/I don’t think you got a clue*—what Bell can say for the first time in a long while is that he has no doubts about his next step.



FOURTEEN HOURS after his cameo at Rockwell, Bell is stuck in traffic on his way to a photo shoot in Miami's arts district. His mother, Lisa, calls to check on his whereabouts, even if the past year has given her plenty of practice in waiting patiently. "I just want to see him play again," she says. Last year Lisa bought front-row seats to each of the Steelers' first three games, even though she knew her son wouldn't be playing. She wore a camouflage team ball cap but realized she wasn't quite as incognito as she'd believed when receiver Antonio Brown spotted her in the front row, Week 3 in Tampa Bay, and waved.

Bell has played football since he was four; by high school, Lisa's most effective disciplinary maneuver for her son was threatening to not let him play in that week's game. As Le'Veon sat out last season he ribbed his mom about that old tactic, pointing out how much they both missed the game.

To scratch his football itch Bell played endless hours of *Madden* and called Lisa when the Steelers were on TV, analyzing Pittsburgh's game plan and displaying Tony Romo-like

predictive powers. He texted James Conner, his backfield replacement, congratulating him on big plays—but he also fixated on how much work Conner was receiving on the goal line, more than he'd gotten himself.

Back in the summer of 2017, the first time the Steelers offered Bell a long-term deal, reportedly five years at \$12 million per, Lisa wanted her son to take it. So did Bell's agent, Adisa Bakari. "Everyone thought I was tripping," Bell says of his declining and opting to play that season on the one-year, \$12.1 million franchise tag.

From Bell's perspective, though, he'd earned more than what was being offered. He'd just gutted through the playoffs with a painful groin injury that at one point left him unable to sit up in bed. He'd played an entire divisional-round game against the Chiefs, despite telling teammates at halftime that he was unsure if he could finish, and then he received

BELL EPOCH
The Steelers star last played in January 2018, against the Jags. Now he's got fresh legs and a new team.

a Toradol injection before the AFC championship game against the Patriots. The first time he was tackled in New England he felt like his left leg was about to rip off; when he went back in the game, he couldn't hit a hole even if it opened up. His day, and eventually the team's season, was over. "I feel like that was our Super Bowl year," Bell says. "I just ended up getting hurt."

At the same time, the market for running backs was sagging. Devonta Freeman's extension with the Falcons, signed in August 2017, averaged just \$8.25 million per year. As player salaries rose across the NFL, the franchise-

tag number for backs actually *dropped*. Citing his value in the passing game (and the fact that he was Pittsburgh's No. 2 receiver behind Brown), Bell tried to counter this trend, asking for \$15 million per year from the Steelers.

Instead, he played the 2017 season on the one-year franchise tag. Then, he says, the day after a playoff loss to the Jaguars in January '18, Steelers general manager Kevin Colbert and coach Mike Tomlin pulled him into an office alone. The team would tag him for a second consecutive season, this time at \$14.5 million, but Bell says they told him that day they'd get a long-term deal done. When the

YOU SAY YOU WANT A REVOLUTION

Well, this is what overnight overhaul looks like in the National Football League **BY CONOR ORR**

RARELY DOES a league change so drastically in such a short period of time. But the events of late December through early March made some aspects of the NFL completely unrecognizable to anyone watching pro football a decade ago. Here's what's radically new:

PUSHBACK AGAINST THE POWERS THAT BE

Heading into the collective bargaining negotiations in 2020, players seem to be tipping the scales back in their favor. Look at the way stars like receiver Antonio Brown, linebacker Khalil Mack and D-tackle Aaron Donald strong-armed their teams into trades (Brown to the Raiders; Mack to the Bears) or long-term deals (Donald with the Rams). Le'Veon Bell sat out a full season, unafraid of the

backlash that usually grinds players into surrendering their personal interests for the supposed good of their team. Even incoming rookies are leveraging themselves better: Michigan D-tackle Rashaan Gary and Oklahoma QB **Kyler Murray** (*below*), projected top picks, didn't fully participate in the predraft dog and pony show.

A COACHING REBALANCE

Look hard (too hard, perhaps) and you can trace all of this year's coaching hires back to the electric, defenseless *Monday Night Football* game in November between the Chiefs and the Rams, who combined for 105 points. Notice how

most teams either took the traditional course—the Broncos (Vic Fangio) and the Dolphins (Brian Flores) hired the two hottest defensive coordinators on the market, in an effort to combat the 2018 offensive wave—or made a massive leap of faith to recreate that scoring boom: 35-year-old Zac Taylor, most recently Sean McVay's QBs coach with the Rams, took over the Bengals; 39-year-old Kliff Kingsbury, an Air Raid disciple, got the Cardinals' top job after being fired at Texas Tech. How these young guns fare will affect not only future coaching hires but also the myriad players brought in to fit their systems. Incoming Air Raid-ready receivers, for example, could thrive—or soon be looking for work in more traditional roles.

GOODBYE, QB NORMS

Somehow we've emerged from the combine with

the 5' 10" Murray still considered the front-runner to be the No. 1 pick in the upcoming draft. *Hmm*. If nothing else, that shows that opinions on quarterback height have dramatically altered over the course of a few years. Drew Brees is no longer an outlier. Russell Wilson is no longer an outlier. Coaches talk about clean sight lines and the ability to see over linemen, but if Murray performs well during his rookie season, how much of that will be exposed as a lazy scouting trope? Several GMs at the combine said their size guidelines have changed significantly over the years—likely as the minds of their coaches opened, or as smaller players flashed game-breaking abilities elsewhere. Murray, if he succeeds, has the power to further alter the future of the position.

THE UNIMPORTANCE OF TRANSCENDENT RECEIVING TALENT

Brown and **Odell Beckham Jr.** (*above*) were traded





Steelers eventually made an opening bid well below what Bell was looking for, he told Bakari to counter by asking for \$17 million per season. In the end, Bell hoped, they'd end up at his \$15 million benchmark.

Pittsburgh's final offer, Bell says, fell short: five years, \$70 million—\$14 million per, with the only fully guaranteed money being a \$10 million signing bonus. (The Steelers have a policy of not offering future guarantees in veteran deals.) But it also included \$33 million paid out over the first two seasons, and Pittsburgh has never cut a player one year into a contract that lucrative.

in 2019. Think about how insane that sentence would have sounded a year or two ago—but also how easily both deals can be defended by coaches and execs who point out that championship teams rarely feature a star receiver. These doubters go back to the Calvin Johnson-era Lions, cite the struggles of franchises that devote large chunks of their salary-cap space to one wideout, then ask: Is it worthwhile? [Demaryius Thomas, Julian Edelman and Alshon Jeffery were not considered or paid

like stars on their recent Super Bowl-winning teams, despite their consistent abilities to win matchups and create open space.] This fall we'll find out if Brown and Beckham were uplifting bad offenses, or if they were actually holding their teams back.

A SAFETY RENAISSANCE

With more coaches looking to create mismatches on offense, the counter is obvious: players who are effective against the run and the pass. Defensive

coordinators love guys who can match up with both silky receivers and bulky tight ends. And it's showing up in the payroll. This month Landon Collins [to the Redskins] and Tyrann Mathieu [Chiefs] became the highest paid players at the position in NFL history, with \$14 million in average salary. And Earl Thomas [Ravens] cashed in just weeks from his 30th birthday, perceived as an age of decline for the position. Just last year we were talking about the twilight of the safety, as former first-round picks like Kenny Vaccaro and Eric Reid fought for scraps in free agency. Reid's kneeling during the national anthem [to raise awareness for social injustices and racial inequality] certainly played into his down market, but even he emerged with a salary bump for 2019. Don't be surprised to see more callbacks to the Giants' three-safety defenses from their '07 Super Bowl run.

THE NFL LEARNS TO TANK

Sashi Brown will be a mere footnote in the annals of the Browns, but his willingness as Cleveland's executive VP of football operations to take a woebegone roster with tradable assets and resist a quick fix will go down as one of the best decisions in modern franchise history. His liquidation sale in 2016 and '17 gifted new GM John Dorsey with high picks and salary-cap space when he arrived last year, and the full scope of the payoff is becoming clear. Back-to-back No. 1 picks produced the most promising pass rusher [Myles Garrett] and QB [Baker Mayfield] that Cleveland has had since its reboot in 1999. The Browns have since used their wealth of resources to acquire Beckham and D-end Olivier Vernon from the Giants—and they still have a top 50 pick in next month's draft. With the Dolphins likely to take a similar approach, this will mark the NFL's first real foray into systematic tanking during the salary-cap era.



“Quarterbacks are leaders, but ***YOU’RE STILL A TEAMMATE,***” says Bell, referring to Ben Roethlisberger. “You’re not Kevin Colbert. You’re not Art Rooney.”

“I was *so close*,” Bell admits now. “Like, I almost [signed] it.”

Many NFL pundits believe Bell should have taken that deal, as it offered more money through both two and three years than his new Jets contract does. But Bell, who watched teammate Ryan Shazier’s career potentially end on a single play, cared foremost about the guaranteed money. Plus, the decision, he says, wasn’t just about money.

BACK IN 2013, when Pittsburgh drafted Bell, he was ecstatic: His mom raised him outside Columbus, Ohio, but she’d come from a family of Steelers supporters and she already had a team flag hanging by her front door. Flash forward five years, to when Bell turned down last summer’s extension offer, and he was starting to think: It’s time for a fresh start.

There have been inklings all offseason of other factors that played a part in Bell’s departure. After Brown forced a trade to the Raiders earlier this month, he expressed frustrations with Pittsburgh quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. Another former Steeler, running back Josh Harris, was more pointed, telling a story about how Roethlisberger once intentionally fumbled to protest a play call. Bell says that Roethlisberger wasn’t the *only* factor in his wanting to leave Pittsburgh—but “yes, it was a factor.”

According to Bell, he and Roethlisberger didn’t quite vibe; Bell wishes they’d shared a “more open, more genuine, more real” relationship. He says players didn’t feel like they were treated by the QB as being on the same level as him. “Quarterbacks are leaders; it is what it is,” Bell says. But “you’re still a teammate at the end of the day. You’re not Kevin Colbert. You’re not [team president Art] Rooney.” (On the subject of quarterbacks in general, Bell says that, given the chance to do everything over, “I’d be playing QB.” Or, he says, in the NBA, where contracts are fully guaranteed and players are compensated by production, not position.)

Despite his output in 2017, when he was named an All-Pro for the second time, Bell says he didn’t feel like the Steelers’ game plans were designed to feature him or that he had a stake in what plays were being called. At the same time, he says, Roethlisberger’s personal preferences played a role in who was given the opportunity to make plays.

Says Bell, “The organization wants to win. Tomlin wants to win. Ben wants to win—but Ben wants to win *his* way, and that’s tough to play with. Ben won a Super Bowl, but he won when he was younger. Now he’s at this stage where he tries to control everything, and [the team] let him get there.”

At times last season, Bell’s feelings about wanting out



of Pittsburgh were mutual. When he didn’t report for Week 1 after missing camp, as he had the previous season, his linemen spoke out publicly. Center Maurkice Pouncey called Bell “a little selfish”; guard Ramon Foster said Bell “doesn’t give a damn.” Bell says he never told anyone he’d be there Week 1, though it’s clear his plan was fluid, influenced by the feelings hurt in negotiations and by his teammates’ public comments.

Bell says he first planned to show up after the Week 7 bye, but the Steelers wouldn’t assure his agent that they wouldn’t trade him (potentially compromising his value as an upcoming free agent by inserting him into a new offense midseason) or use its (limiting) transition tag on him for next season.

Later in the year, one week before the Nov. 13 deadline, Bell tweeted “farewell Miami” and flew from Miami to Pittsburgh. “I was gonna go back to play, forget everything that happened all year, bite the bullet and hope they respect me,” he says. “Because I just wanted to play football.” (He also confirms what Roethlisberger told the press around that time, that the QB texted Bell, saying he hoped to have Bell back, but that Bell did not reply.)

Why then, did Bell make the trek and not return to the field? He refers loosely to being turned off again by comments that some teammates made to the press around that time, although he can’t recall who said what, specifically. He also points out that if he’d returned that late in the season, his prorated yearly earnings would have been low enough that the Steelers could have transition-tagged him at a lower fixed value, making it more likely they would have some control over his rights in 2019.

BLUE STEEL

Sad as Bell is to go, Pittsburgh suffered from having too many stars, with Brown and Big Ben. There’ll be no such problem in New York.



Ultimately, Bell says, it got to the point where he knew he couldn't go back. "I felt like: For me to get my full potential and be the player I know I can be, I gotta go play with different players. I gotta go play with people who want to see me succeed, who want me to be great. Getting a fresh start, [that's] the best thing for me."

BY LAST DECEMBER, Bell was already looking ahead to free agency. The football world, meanwhile, was going to have something to say about that. Rumors surfaced that his weight had ballooned to 260 pounds. He fact-checks that: more like 240, the same as his playing weight at Michigan State. Bell says he now has that number down to 230, after five-times-a-week workouts. More important than his waistline, he says he doesn't feel his football aches anymore, like the chronically sore right wrist that had been nagging him for years.

In the end, Bell's free-agency decision came down to the Jets and the 49ers, whom he says offered a three-year, \$40 million contract. He and Brown didn't stay in touch last season, but Bell says he had discussions with his old Steelers teammate and Brown's new quarterback, Derek Carr, about joining the Raiders.

Instead, the Jets—an early favorite to land Bell, a team with salary-cap space to spare and a desire for a splashy headliner—are now heralding Bell as second-year QB Sam

Darnold's new best friend: one of the most dynamic runners in the NFL and a guy who can also serve as an outlet in the passing game. Darnold, along with safety Jamal Adams, led the recruiting charge, but the franchise also got an assist from Curtis Martin, the Hall of Fame running back who spent eight seasons with the Jets and whose patient running style Bell grew up admiring. The two backs spoke four weeks ago and Martin encouraged Bell, he says, to "go with my heart and my gut."

A more practical factor in picking New York: The team was willing to bake into Bell's contract a chance to meet the \$15 million per-year average that he has long sought (although the escalators and incentives needed to get there include hard-to-reach criteria such as NFL MVP and Offensive Player of the Year). "People think, You are an athlete, so you've got your money—keep quiet and play," Bell says. "Yeah, I could've taken what [the Steelers] gave me and been quiet and been unhappy. But I chose not to. I wanted to be happy. I wanted to do what I felt was right and move forward. And now I'm here. And I wouldn't think twice about changing it."

BELL, EVER confident in his own skin, arrives at his photo shoot unchanged from his party uniform: white T-shirt, chains, Louboutin gear. He slips on a green-hued blazer and plants himself at a poker table, where he's directed to push a pile of chips to the middle. Lisa Bell, looking on, remarks that she likes the shot where he's pushing the tallest stacks, in her mind representing the biggest odds against her son.

Many in the NFL don't believe Bell's gamble was worth it; they think he'd have been better off taking the long-term deal the Steelers offered last year, or playing on the \$14.5 million tag and then cashing in. His face scrunches up at this suggestion. "How *didn't* I win?" he asks.

He set a new mark for the most fully-guaranteed money for a running back, and he points to the fact that after he asked for \$15 million per year, challenging the paradigm for what running backs are worth, the Rams gave that much to Todd Gurley, last July.

"Receivers make [roughly] \$19 million per year—why can't I make 17?" he asks. "The fact that I put that number out there, that opened it up for Todd. So when Zeke [Elliott] comes up, or Saquon [Barkley], if they're the best running back they're gonna beat Todd's deal. I [took] the bullet. [We] can't sit here just taking what y'all [offer]. It's gonna go: 15, then 16. . . . Then at some point it's gonna stop and 10, 12 years from now there's going to have to be another Le'Veon Bell who's gonna take a stand."

This is his view. Perhaps it's not one that others share. But if the last 420-odd days have confirmed anything about Le'Veon Bell, it's that he's going to do things his own way. □

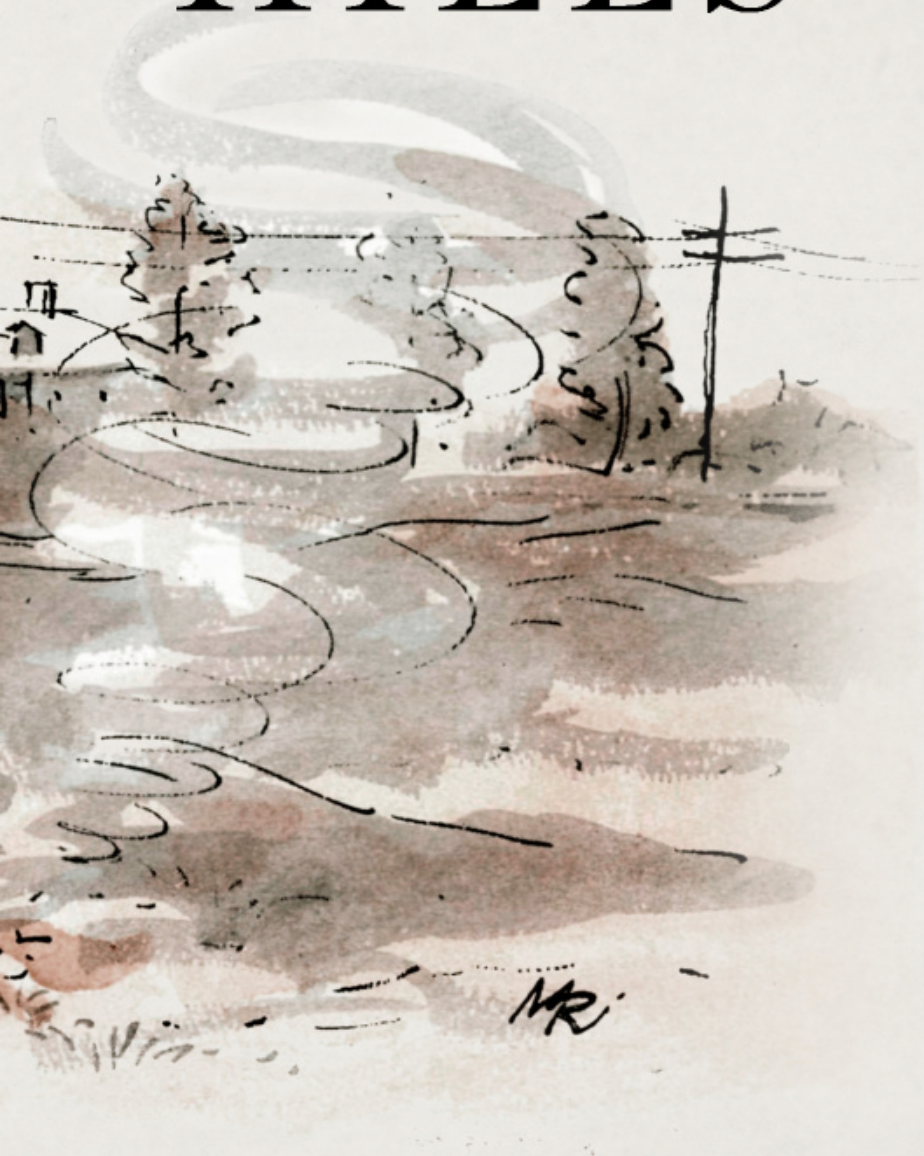
GLORY G



IN SIX DECADES AS A WRITER, INCLUDING MORE THAN TWO AT SI, **DAN JENKINS**, WHO DI
PROFESSION WITH A MUCH-IMITATED, NEVER-MATCHED STYLE. HIS VIBRANT PROSE WAS
HUMOR—TRAITS AMPLY ON DISPLAY IN THIS CLASSIC ABOUT THE FORT WORTH GOLF COU

Adapted from *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*
AUGUST 16, 1965

AME AT GOAT HILLS



ED ON MARCH 7 AT 90, TRANSFORMED THE
INFUSED WITH HEART AND WRY
RSE THAT HE CALLED, FOR A TIME, HOME



SARAH PILEGGI

BY
DAN JENKINS

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MICHAEL RAMUS

→ **GOAT HILLS** is gone now. It was swallowed up almost four years ago by the bulldozers of progress, and in the end it was nice to learn that something could take a divot out of those hard fairways. But all of the regular players had left long before. We had grown up at last. Maybe it will be all right to talk about the place now, and about the people and the times we had. Maybe it will be therapeutic. At least it will help explain why I do not play golf so much anymore. I mean, I keep getting invited to Winged Head and Burning Foot and all those fancy clubs we sophisticated New Yorkers are supposed to frequent, places where, I hear, they have real flagsticks instead of broom handles. It sounds fine, but I usually beg off. I am, frankly, still over golfed from all those years at Goat Hills in Texas. You would be, too, if. . . . Well, let me tell you some of it. Not all. I will try to be truthful and not too sentimental. But where shall I begin? With Cecil? Yeah, I think so. He was sort of a symbol in those days, and. . . .

W **E CALLED HIM** Cecil the Parachute, because he fell down a lot. He would attack the golf ball with a whining, leaping half-turn—more of a calisthenic than a swing, really—and occasionally, in his spectacular struggles for extra distance, he would soar right off the end of elevated tees.

He was a slim, bony, red-faced little man, who wore crepe-soled shoes and heavily starched shirts that crackled like crunched glass. When he was earthbound Cecil drove a delivery truck for a cookie factory, Grandma's Cookies, and he always parked it—hid it, rather—behind a tall hedge near the clubhouse. When the truck was there, out of sight of passing cars (or of cookie-company dispatchers snooping on cookie-truck drivers), you could be pretty sure that not only was Cecil out on the course but so were Tiny, Easy Reid, Magoo, Foot the Free, Grease Repellent, Ernie, Matty, Rush, Little Joe, Weldon the Oath, Jerry, John the Band-Aid and Moron Tom.



THE GAME SURVIVED NOT JUST MY OWN SHAFT-BENDING, DIVOT-STOMPING PRESENCE, BUT HEAT, RAIN, SNOW, WAR, TORNADOES, JOBS, ILLNESS, DIVORCES, BIRTH, DEATH AND CONSIDERATIONS OF INFINITY.

There was also the very good chance that all of us would be in one hollering, protesting, club-slinging teensome. The game was not the kind of golf that Gene Sarazen or any of his stodgy friends ever would have approved of. But it was, nevertheless, the kind we played for about 15 years, from the mid-'40s to the late '50s, at a windy, dusty, indifferently mowed, stone-hard, broomstick-flagged, practically treeless, residentially surrounded public course named Worth Hills, in Fort Worth. Goat Hills, we called it, not too originally.

It was a gambling game that went on in some fashion or another, involving from two to 20 players, almost every day of every year. The game survived not just my own shaft-bending, divot-stomping presence, but heat, rain, snow, war, tornadoes, jobs, studies, illness, divorces, birth, death and considerations of infinity. If there were certain days when it seemed the game might help pay part of my tuition through Texas Christian University—a jumble of yellow-brick buildings across the street from the course—there were others when it seemed certain to guarantee a lifetime of indebtedness. Either way you were trapped, incessantly drawn to the Hills, like Durrell to Alexandria.

Nearly all of the days at the Hills began the same way, with lazy conversations on the front porch of the small white clubhouse. We would be slouched in chairs, smoking, drinking coffee, complaining about worldly things, such as the Seventh Street Theater not changing its movie in

weeks. Say it was August. We would be looking across the putting green at the heat. In Texas in August you can see the heat. It looks like germs under a microscope.

In fact, say it was the day of the Great Scooter Wreck. We were lounging. Matty, who had a crew cut and wore glasses and looked collegiate (and grew up to be a doctor), was resting against a rock pillar on the porch, playing tunes on his front teeth with his fingernails. He could do that. Learned it in study hall. For money he could even play "Sixty Minute Man" or "Rocket 88" or whatever happened to be No. 1 on the jukebox at Jack's Place on the Mansfield Highway. I was reading either *The Best of S.J. Perelman* or *The Brothers Karamazov*. Any kind of book would prompt needling whoops from Tiny, who was a railroad conductor, or Weldon the Oath, who was a postman, or Grease Repellent, who worked at the Texaco station three blocks away. ("Hey, Jenkins! What you gonna do with all them facts clangin' around in yer head?") Foot the Free, which

was short for Big Foot the Freeloader, was there, practice-putting at a small, chipped-out crevice in the concrete of the porch, a spot that marked the finish of the finest one hole of golf I ever saw played—but more about that later. Magoo was around. And Little Joe. Presently John the Band-Aid showed up, striding grimly from the parking lot, clubs over his shoulder, ready to go. He had beaten a Turf King pinball machine somewhere on University Drive and he had some money.

"You and you and you and you and you, too," said John. "All of you two, two, two automatic one-down presses, whatever gets even on 9 and 18, and whipsaw everbody 70 or better for five." John the Band-Aid had lost the day before.

Little Joe and I took a scooter, one of those two-seaters with three wheels, and John and Magoo took one. The rest walked. We were an eightsome. If others came later they would join up along the way, as always, and there would be some action for them, too. Plenty.

With only eight players it was a fairly simple game to book keep. You played each of the other seven individually on the front nine, on the back and on the 18—three bets each to start. Without any presses—new bets—that was a sizable investment right there. But new bets came quickly, because of an automatic one-down press rule and big, get-even bets on 9 and 18. It was certainly nice to birdie the 9th and 18th holes sometimes. Like maybe \$100 nice.

Naturally, there was always a long pause at both the 9th



and 18th tees to figure out how everybody stood. Like this particular day. John the Band-Aid, I recall, had shot even par but was down to everyone.

"I got to be the alltime world's champion unlucky," he said, beating his driver against the tee marker. "Magoo can't play and he's beatin' me, and Matty can't play and he's beatin' me, and my young partner's dead as an old woman and. . ."

John the Band-Aid, who wore glasses and a straw hat and kept a handkerchief tied around his neck for protection against sunburn, rarely observed honors on the tee. In fact, the game sort of worked in reverse etiquette. The players who were losing teed off first.

"I'm gonna hit this one right into young Stadium Drive," said John, impatiently. The 9th at the Hills was a long par-4. The tee was on a bluff, above a desperate drop-off into a cluster of undernourished hackberry trees, a creek, rocks and weeds. Ideally, the drive had to carry over the trees and creek and into the uphill fairway, leaving about a seven-iron to the green. Stadium Drive was behind the green.

John the Band-Aid curved a wondrous slice into the right rough, and coming off of his follow-through slung the club in the general direction of Eagle Mountain Lake, just missing Little Joe. The Band-Aid's shot irritated Little Joe, and so did the flying club. "Man, man," said Joe. "They ought to put me in a box and take me to the state fair for bein' in this game."

I was fairly mad, too. One under par and no money ahead. Maybe that's why I pointed the scooter straight down the hill and let it run. We were almost instantly out of control. "Son of a young . . ." said Joe, holding on. The scooter zoomed, but the front wheel struck a boulder and, like a plane taking off, we were in the air. I sailed

straight over the front, and Joe went out the right side. The scooter, flipping and spewing clubs, landed on both of us, mostly on my left leg.

I think I was out for about 10 seconds before I heard all of the laughter behind me and felt the clubs and rocks underneath. They pulled the scooter off, and off Joe's white canvas bag—or what was left of it. Battery acid had been jolted out of the scooter and was already beginning to eat away at the bag.

"I got two says Joe don't have a bag before we get to 18," said Magoo. Foot called it. Although my left ankle was so swollen I had to play the rest of the way with only one shoe, we continued. It was on the 14th green that we noticed Magoo was a winner. When Joe went to pick up his bag after putting out, the

only things left were the top metal ring, the bottom, the wooden stick and the shoulder strap. Not only that, Joe's left pants leg was going fast.

In or out of a runaway scooter, our game frequently took odd directions. Bored, we often played Goat Hills backward, to every other hole, to every third hole, entirely out of bounds except for the greens (which meant you had to stay in the roads and lawns), with only one club or at night, which was stimulating because of all the occupied cars parked on the more remote fairways. One of the most interesting games we invented, however, was the Thousand-yard Dash. This was a one-hole marathon. It started at the farthest point on the course from the clubhouse—and ended at the chipped-out place in the concrete on the porch.

There were 12 of us who each put \$5 in the pot and started flailing away, cutting across fairways, intruding on other games, cursing and carefully counting the strokes of those who had chosen the same route as ours. Some went to the left of the stone restroom, some went to the right. I followed Foot the Free because he could never afford to lose. He carried the same \$5 bill, I think, for eight years. We hit a hooked driver, another hooked driver, a third hooked driver and then a hooked 3-wood—you had to hook at the Hills to get the roll—and that got us both within pitching distance of the porch. The others were out of it by now, lost in the creek or in the flower beds of the apartment houses that bordered the No. 1 fairway.

My approach shot carried the concrete porch, hit hard against the clubhouse wall, chased Wells Howard, the pro, back inside the door, brought a screech from his wife, Lola, glanced off one of the rock pillars and finally came to rest—puttable if I moved a chair—about 20 feet from the hole.

Foot played a bounce shot, lofting a high wedge, letting

it plop in front of the porch on some gravel, then hop up over the curb and skid against the wall. He was only 10 feet from the hole. Hell of a shot.

We quickly got a broom and began sweeping dirt particles off the porch and took off our cleats because they are very bad for a stance on concrete and put Wells and Lola at ease by convincing them that this would look good in our memoirs one day after we had all won the young National Open and got famous.

A couple of rent-club players strolled out of the golf shop, and Foot asked them not to walk in his line. My putt offered one distinct danger, tapping it too firmly and having it roll past the hole and into a row of golf carts lined up at the far end—which is precisely what happened. I tried to argue that the carts were an unnatural hazard and that I deserved a free lift; but Wells, the pro, no doubt believing the game was my idea, ruled I had to play it. On in five, I 18-putted for a 23. Against anyone else I might still have had a chance. But Foot was one of the great putters in history. He calmly tapped his putt and it dribbled slowly, slowly, over the concrete, wavering, wobbling—and in.

T O AT LEAST partly understand why anyone would hang around a municipal golf course for one-third of his life playing games such as these you have to understand something about the town and the state and what golf means there.

First of all, Fort Worth is basically a quiet place with a river, the Trinity, a fragrant stockyard on the North Side a Convair plant, a couple of newspapers, a lot of beer taverns, a few elegant neighborhoods, a downtown area sparkling with loan companies, and a university, TCU, which is primarily noted for producing Sammy Baugh and Davey O'Brien. It is a town where little has happened, outside of a few important football games, since Vernon Castle, the famous dancer, was killed when he crashed a plane into a field in Benbrook during World War I. Nor has anyone cared to make something happen except, occasionally, on the golf courses.

Fort Worth is where Ben Hogan and Byron Nelson came from, and this is one of the first facts I ever learned. It probably happened to other kids the same way. There you were one day, waving a yardstick like a sword, playing Errol Flynn in *The Sea Hawk*, when suddenly your parents decided you had a natural swing. They told you about Hogan and Nelson, and about Jimmy Demaret, who came from Houston, and about Ralph Guldahl, Lloyd Mangrum and Harry Cooper, who came from Dallas, and they shoved you onto the nearest course and said not to come home until you were ready for the Ethiopian Four Ball. So you stayed 20 years curing a shank and learning to love a duck hook.

Probably because of the climate—there are only two weeks out of the year when a man would not play golf, but

even those February afternoons might be considered ideal in Pittsburgh—the sport has for 30 years been second in importance only to football. This is true throughout the state. Golf always received generous attention in the papers. Almost every town with a henhouse, some tin cans and broomsticks still has an annual invitational tournament. These begin in mid-March and last through mid-September. It is possible for an enterprising, neat-swinging high school or college golfer to play competitively for 22 weeks or more of the year, winning, if he is good enough, more sets of clubs, TV sets and silver trays than he can ever sell to get money to gamble with.

It was this vast amateur circuit that gave you Hogan and Nelson and Demaret, and later on, two whom I can relate, with a certain amount of pride, came right out of our game at Goat Hills—Ernie Vossler and Jerry Edwards. Ernie was a relentless competitor who could not understand why anyone but him ever sank a putt. Sometimes, when someone like Weldon the Oath, so named because he talked to the ball in oaths, made one, Ernie would just walk straight to the clubhouse.

After I holed out a 30-foot putt to halve a gimme birdie one afternoon, Vossler left for good. He moved on to bigger things, to the big-money games at Ridglea, to become city champion, state amateur champion, ultimately on to the PGA Tour. I have always considered Ernie our honor graduate, although Edwards may outdo him. Jerry could drive the ball four miles, or roughly the distance to old Paschal High School (now Tech), a Gibraltar of formative education that turned most of us out with degrees in Library Pass Forging, Double Lunch Period Registration,



Boiler Room Smoking, Chug-a-Lug, Basketball and Marriage. Except for a recurring Goat Hills temper, Jerry has a sound game and has been in the money many times on the PGA Tour. So far, however, his greatest publicity came when he was rumored to have gone AWOL from the Army in 1962 to play in the U.S. Open.

“A true Hills man,” Magoo said.

Although Vossler and Edwards were the only two who succeeded, all of us at one time, I believe, envisioned a pro career. Sadly, my own dreams were constantly interrupted by reality. The first time was early in the State Junior at San Antonio, when I was defeated 3 and 2 by a cross-handed kid wearing tennis shoes. Thirsting for some sort of revenge, I returned the following year and lost to a barefoot 14-year-old who had only five clubs.

I **T WAS IN** the last few years at Goat Hills, before the city sold those 106 acres to TCU so the school could build more yellow-brick buildings, that the games got too big, too outrageously expensive. One reason was that most of us were working by then, or were supposed to be. We somehow managed always to have the afternoons free. I had ingeniously slithered my way up to \$87.50 per week at *The Fort Worth Press*. So I was a high player now. And then there was Moron Tom, who worked

ter. Frankly, we played superbly. We birdied so many holes between us that Moron Tom, each time either of us swung, said, “Cod Ee-rack Fockle-dim!” That was his pronunciation of Doc Cary Middlecoff spelled backward, and a compliment.

As we came off the 17th green, having birdied every hole since the 13th, Magoo and I calculated that if we could simply par the 18th we would not be able to get the money home in Cecil the Parachute’s cooky truck. With all of the double and triple presses, it was up to around \$600, at least.

The 18th was an easy par-4. You drove from a windy knoll, with the wind helping, to a wide, wide fairway across a creek and an embankment. The only conceivable trouble was far to the right, beyond the bordering 10th fairway, where Stadium Drive was out of bounds. In all my years I never saw anyone slice that badly—only Magoo when Moron Tom spoke to him for all that money.

At the top of Magoo’s backswing, Moron Tom quietly said, “Tissim, Oogam,” which of course was “Miss it, Magoo” backwards, and my poor partner sliced out of bounds. Well, we had to laugh about the irony of it. Once again Magoo had blown the Open. And there could be no protest. Needles were common. Sneezing, coughing, dropping a full bag of clubs on a player’s back-swing were part of it. Normally, it was something you ignored.

Magoo simply looked at his club and then at me and



ALL OF US ENVISIONED A PRO CAREER. SADLY, MY OWN DREAMS WERE CONSTANTLY INTERRUPTED BY REALITY. I LOST IN THE STATE JUNIOR TO A BAREFOOT 14-YEAR-OLD WHO HAD ONLY FIVE CLUBS.

terribly hard at eight ball, poker, gin and pinball. He could high-play you.

Moron Tom was a likable, muscular West Texan who had gone to TCU to play football but had quit when he discovered you had to practice every day during the season. He was a brilliant hustler who talked in a fast code, often describing his long tee shots with such immodest expressions as “quadruple unreal.” He almost never spoke English, only a weird gibberish that you had to learn or not know what bets you had with him.

There was one special day—the day of the last truly big game—that began with Moron Tom saying, “I’ll take toops and threeps from Youngfut, Youngjun, Youngmut and Youngrus.” Translated, that meant he wanted 2 up and 3 up from young Foot, young John, young Matty and young Rush. He wanted the same from Magoo, too, but Magoo said, “Kane go-fert,” which was Moronese for “Can’t go for it.”

Somehow Magoo and I wound up as partners, and this was bad. Magoo was a good player, but he was unlucky. But this time, all the way around, it did not seem to mat-

ter. Frankly, we played superbly. We birdied so many holes between us that Moron Tom, each time either of us swung, said, “Cod Ee-rack Fockle-dim!” That was his pronunciation of Doc Cary Middlecoff spelled backward, and a compliment.

Now, across the creek at the 18th, laid upright into the embankment, was a storm drain, roughly three feet around. We used to pitch at it with old balls from the ladies’ tee, but it was a rare day when anyone ever actually hit it. From up on the men’s tee 100 yards back, it was an awfully small target. In fact, it never even entered my mind. I was intending to drive the green, frankly, and get a birdie just to make up for Magoo’s slice. That would have been quadruple unreal.

But at the height of my arc, Moron Tom whispered something again.

“Clutch, Mother Zilch,” he said.

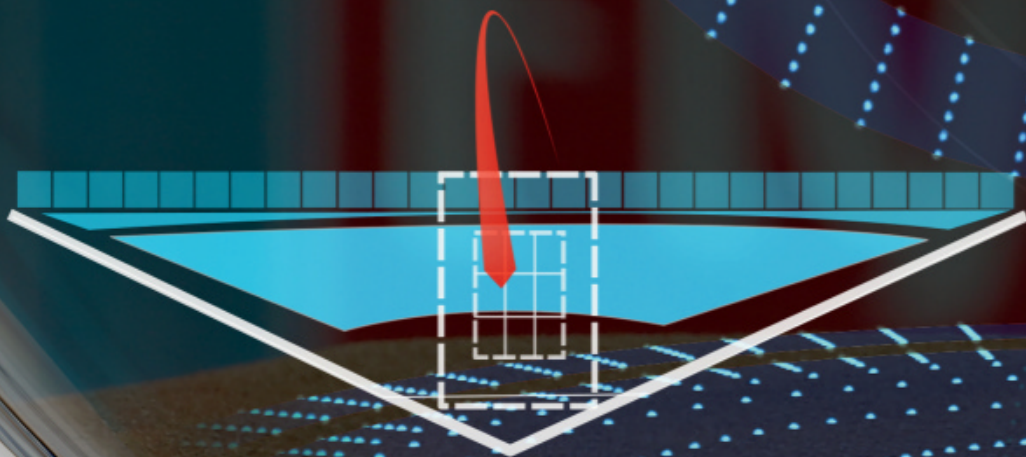
I did not fall completely down, but almost. The clubhead hit about two inches behind the ball. The shot snap-hooked into the ground just in front of the ladies’ tee, took a giant hop to the right off some rocks and—I swear to you—went straight into the sewage drain.

It was the only hole in one I ever made, and the shot that semiretired me from golf. Forever. □



BELIE

Baseball's future takes shape in 2019. BRYCE HARPER settles in for 13 years with the Phillies. MANNY
MLB's latest phenom. A stud third baseman plans to be much more in Houston. And beneath all that:





EXIT SPEED

MAX

96.1

93.5

MPH

AVG.

90.0



SEEING IS

WINING

MACHADO puts down new roots with the Padres, who also welcome
A tech boom is changing how players are made and the game is played

BY **TOM VERDUCCI**



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43



COLD AND CLEAR AS VERITY,

a new dawn broke over Camelback Ranch, spring home of the Dodgers. So did morning. ¶ In one batting cage at the Glendale, Ariz., complex last month—not the cage with ground force measurement plates—rookie outfielder Alex Verdugo, 22, took batting practice while tethered to a laptop computer by two dozen thick white wires sprouting like vines from a harness around his hips and torso. Behind him, also in the cage, two technicians monitored the 3D motion images of Verdugo and his swing.

In the bullpen of a back field, pitching prospects Dustin May, 21, and Tony Gonsolin, 24, threw with a tripod-mounted high-speed camera behind them and a wedge-shaped radar tracking device on the ground in front of them. The Dodgers maintained four such technology-equipped mounds in this bullpen alone, and more at the minor league fields. Behind the mounds stood 13 operators, analysts and coaches. Four analysts held tablets to immediately show pitchers the velocity, vertical break, horizontal break, spin rate, spin axis and path of any pitch—on-the-spot sequencing of a pitch genome.

On each of two diamonds, five devices tracked every pitch

of live batting practice: a high-speed camera with an operator behind the pitcher, a tracking device on the ground and video cameras behind the plate and to each side.

Analysts in khakis did not quite equal players in spikes, but the visual was close enough to render the effect unmistakable: A technology boom is changing baseball. Once confined to a handful of teams and analytic boiler rooms, technology has exploded in the past year to become embraced (if not understood) by all 30 teams. Technology is changing how players learn, how coaches coach, how managers manage, how front offices evaluate and how teams compete. Its yield of verity, as Shakespeare's Malcolm would allow, has become one of the king-becoming graces.

"This generation of players has brought about the biggest, fastest change in baseball that I've ever seen," says Cubs catching coach Mike Borzello, who begins his 29th year in professional baseball. Only two years ago, for instance, the Astros were the only team to extensively use the high-speed camera, a small blue box called an Edgertronic SC1, a \$5,000 device originally intended for scientific researchers. Shooting at 1,000 frames per second or more (faster than your usual slow-motion TV replay), it focuses on a tight window in which the ball leaves the pitcher's hand, revealing in stunning clarity how the baseball comes

off a pitcher's fingertips and how it spins. It does for pitches what high-speed cameras did for the wings of a hummingbird: It reveals what previously went unseen by even the keenest of human eyes.

The Astros first considered the camera so proprietary that they would tape over its identifying name, lest they tip off other clubs to their secret sauce. By last year a half dozen teams had begun using the devices. This year the cameras were as ubiquitous around camps as bats and balls. Major league teams ordered so many of them that the manufacturer, Sanstreak,

posted on its website, "Due to high demand, lead time on all SC1 cameras is 12 weeks. . . . One camera per order, please."

Likewise, pitch-tracking devices made by Trackman and Rapsodo are suddenly everywhere. The \$4,500 Rapsodo is an 11½-pound unit that looks like somebody left a slightly open pizza box 20 feet in front of home plate. It provides instant data on at least 10 different pitch metrics so that a pitcher, as its website touts, can "design your perfect pitch."

"In my four years here," says Houston manager AJ Hinch, "I've watched tech go from, 'We're just going to get video and don't know what to do with it' to now being ever pres-

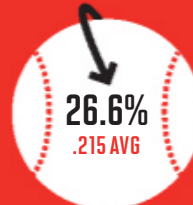


SPIN CYCLE

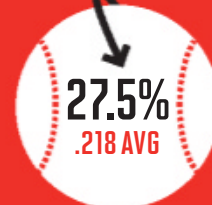
The rise in velocity has leveled off—the average big league fastball has been 93.2 mph for three straight seasons. So pitchers like Red Sox ace Chris Sale (*above*) are increasingly turning to breaking pitches instead.



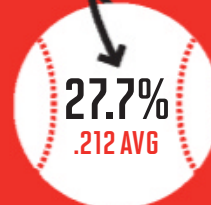
2015



2016



2017



2018

ent. Justin Verlander is saying, ‘Why isn’t that camera over here?’ He wants every pitch [captured].”

The ability to capture information on every pitch has ignited an explosion of “designer” breaking pitches that has made for the toughest era in history for a hitter to make contact. In the cold truth of its diagnostics, technology is telling pitchers—from a prospect like Gonsolin to a Cy Young Award winner like Verlander—what to throw and what not to throw.

What’s coming is a day when catchers wear a sleeve embedded with a device to measure how his arm and hand moved to receive and frame a pitch; when motion capture devices reveal secrets about the swing to finally allow offense to fight back against the gains technology has made for pitching; and when a batter prepares for an at bat by wearing a virtual reality headset that re-creates the exact likely pitches of the opposing pitcher.

“It’s not quite there,” Cubs president Theo Epstein says of virtual reality as a major league training device, “but in two or three years you might see every team’s hitters training to hit off other team’s pitchers before they go up to hit.”

Says Galen Carr, director of player personnel for the Dodgers, “I’d be surprised if by next season [VR] isn’t fully functional in a handful of clubhouses.”

“Probably sooner than that,” says Jarrett Sims, CEO of Monsterful VR, maker of the RibeeVR system, in a phone interview. “If you were in the office with me, you would see me smiling. I’ll leave it at that.”

As evidenced by a typical spring training day, the Dodgers are industry leaders in technology. According to one industry source, they spend about

\$20 million annually on research and development—hardware, software, salaries. That figure does not include a separate technology incubator business they have operated since 2015. Their Global Sports Venture Studio helps develop emerging technology companies in all sports, not just baseball. When the firm developing the pitch-framing sleeve went belly-up, the Dodgers, one of its investors, bought the company and its technology.

The Cubs, according to another source, are a distant second in technology investments, at about \$13 million. The Astros, Rays, Red Sox and Yankees are the other clubs in the top echelon of tech-savvy teams.

Houston has been recognized as such a successful early adopter that clubs playing catch-up—such as the Angels, Orioles and Braves—hired away more than 20 executives, coaches and analysts from the Astros in just the past five months. “The gap has narrowed,” said one source from a large market club, “but we know how to use it. A lot of

teams have it but don’t know how to use it, like the Marlins. They just know they have it. They don’t know what that camera does. They’ve captured [the video]. But they haven’t hired the people to interpret it, apply it to the coaches, then apply it to the players.”

Under new GM Mike Elias, who was part of Houston’s brain drain, the Orioles hold “spin axis seminars” for pitchers—something the Astros were doing four years ago. Elias was Houston’s scouting director when, in the 2016 draft, the Astros, with the 17th overall pick, selected Forrest Whitley, a high school pitcher from San Antonio. Whitley happened to pitch a high school playoff game in Round Rock, Texas, home of Houston’s Triple A team. The Astros turned on their ballpark’s pitch-tracking device, Trackman, and learned that Whitley had an abnormally high spin rate on his four-seam fastball, a characteristic of the pitch that makes it harder to hit.

Since he signed, Whitley has thrown virtually every pitch in games, bullpen sessions and sometimes even in flat-ground throwing sessions with the Edgertronic, Trackman or Rapsodo watching. Whitley, 21, is now the best pitching prospect in baseball, as well as the prototype of a generation fully immersed in technology. “I have friends in

Shape Shifters

One of the Dodgers’ top pitching prospects, May is part of a generation that grew up speaking the language of spin rates and pitch shapes.



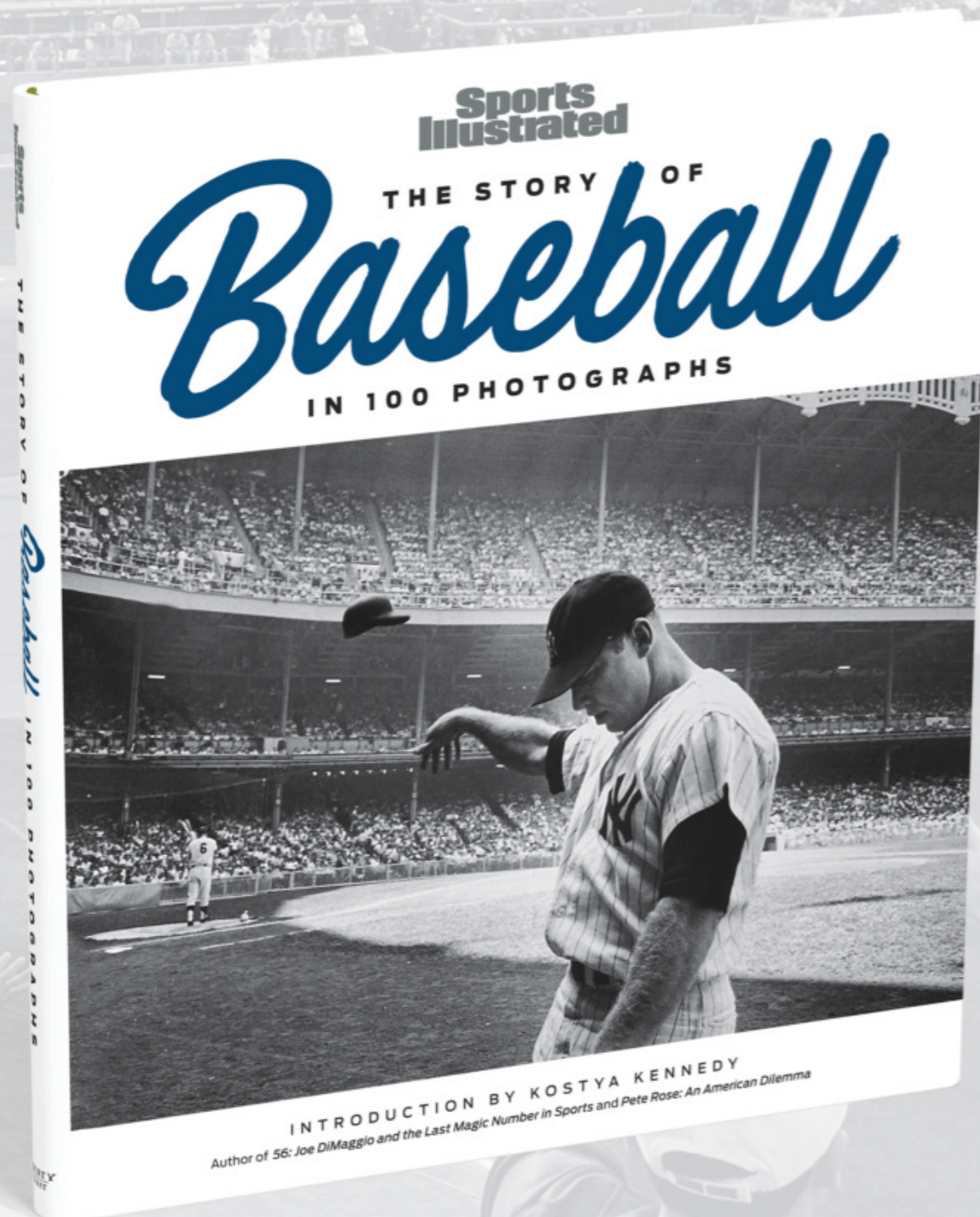
SLIDING SCALE

The breaking pitch boom is driven by the slider: From 2015 to '18 its usage rose by 47%. At the same time, velocity on the pitch has gone down. What’s happening? Pitchers are chasing spin rates more than pure velo—and it’s working.

YEAR	NUMBER	RPM	MPH	AVG
2018	113,805	2,397	84.4	.209
2017	108,247	2,367	84.5	.215
2016	78,225	2,287	84.9	.216
2015	77,543	2,106	84.8	.216

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all these other organizations, and I tell them I do not throw a bullpen without Rapsodo and Edgertronic, and they think that's the craziest thing in the whole world," he says. "I've grown up in this organization, and that's all I've known. So it's hard to imagine getting anything done without them."

B **BEFORE GAME 1** of the 2017 World Series, Hinch was walking with Gene Dias, the Astros' vice president of media relations, in a narrow hallway beneath Dodger Stadium toward the recently relocated visitors' clubhouse. As they passed the room that housed the old visitors' clubhouse, Hinch took a glance past the open door and saw people sitting at desks in front of laptops.

"Gene, is that the media work room?" Hinch asked.

"No. That's their R&D department."

"Holy s---! Let's go back there again."

They turned around. The manager of the Astros, in full uniform, stepped into the room. He saw the length of it filled with people working at laptops. The capacity stunned even someone from the tech-heavy Astros.

The sign on the door said LOS ANGELES DODGERS in script, and below it in print, BASEBALL OPERATIONS. RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT. The symbolism of the conversion

Motion capture

The Cubs' spring complex is tricked out with devices like Rapsodo cameras in bullpens.

was hard to miss: Physical space that once had been the inner sanctum of players had been turned over to number crunchers. But the only way for such a large R&D department to succeed, according to Dodgers president of baseball operations

Andrew Friedman, is for no metaphorical wall to exist between the two distinctly different groups of people. "It's in the application," Friedman says about the key to using technology. "The data itself, the information, is something most every team has now. So it's about how the various departments are synced up to make it actually be actionable."

Says Epstein, "Five years ago you had to tiptoe around ballplayers and the eye roll of coaches who thought [tech] was getting in the way. Now there's a huge appetite, and the players feel like they're missing out if you're not providing it for them, and there's this great symbiotic relationship between the R&D guys and the players and coaches. It's awesome."

The younger generation is driving the fast wave of

acceptance. Earl Weaver introduced the radar gun to the big leagues in 1972. Tony Gwynn popularized the use of videotape in the '80s. For years technology traveled a top-down path, with the minors and amateurs copying what worked in the majors. This tech boom has surfaced from the bottom up and the outside in, whether it's bubbled up from the golf world (swing and ball flight analysis) or private baseball labs such as Driveline in Kent, Wash. (high-speed cameras, wearable devices and motion capture).

The Cubs' state-of-the-art spring training complex is a good example of how fast this generation of players has adopted technology. Well, the facility was state of the art when it opened in 2014—it's already outdated. The video room now is too small. "For the first three or four years very few people went into that video room unless you were a coach," says Borzello. "Now there's 20 guys in there. They're fighting for time on the computer."

Not only are they more comfortable with technology, young players also learn differently than older players. Studies have shown millennials and those that follow them are more likely to crave visual and auditory cues and require change in delivery formats to maintain interest. They seek cause-and-effect solutions more than the patience and diligence of "nose-to-the-grindstone" practice.

And so baseball teams are hiring more coaches who are younger and often come straight out of college baseball or

Twins, but he also conducts "visual training" seminars. Before each individually scripted bullpen session a Minnesota pitcher will watch clips of his best examples of the specific pitches he is working on that day.

When Houston posted an opening for a minor league hitting coach job this offseason, the requirements resembled the standards for a Ph.D. application: "analyze hitter performance deficiencies using tools, reports and technology . . . strong computer skills and proficient in Microsoft Office . . . technical degree is a plus . . . SQL and R coding skills is a plus."

Technology is how players learn. "From their amateur days they demand it," Epstein says. "They're also all on social media, so if there's anything out there on Twitter that looks like it's helpful and the organization doesn't provide or understand, it you lose credit with your own players."

"You have to know your stuff backwards and forwards. If you try to b.s. your way through it, you'll be written off."

J **JUSTIN VERLANDER** is 36 and broke into the big leagues in 2005, two years before the iPhone. Yet since he joined Houston in a trade on Aug. 31, 2017, he has become as enraptured with technology as any millennial.

Immediately after the trade, the Astros had Verlander throw with the Edgertronic and Rapsodo, tools he never had with the Tigers. The camera revealed that Verlander

EYE-OPENERS

Super-high-tech devices—each costing at least \$5,000—are now as ubiquitous around teams as bats and balls



TRACKMAN

Captures spin rate, exit speed and launch angle with Doppler radar tech



EDGERTRONIC

Super slo-mo shows the window in which the ball leaves the fingertips



RAPSODO

Uses radar and rapid-image-capturing to provide instant data

the private sector, including Rangers assistant hitting coach Callix Crabbe, who was hired out of IMG Academy; Rays "process and analytics coach" Jonathan Erlichman, who was a math major at Princeton who never played beyond T-ball; Phillies minor league hitting coordinator Jason Ochart, who will retain his job as director of hitting at Driveline, and Twins pitching coach Wes Johnson, who was the pitching coach at the University of Arkansas. "He was using high-speed cameras back in 2011 at Dallas Baptist," Twins executive vice president Derek Falvey says of Johnson. Not only has Johnson brought Edgertronic cameras to the

was "showing" his slider to hitters too early by having it pop up out of his hand. He changed his hand position to stay behind the ball longer, creating the desired effect of having his slider look like a fastball as it left his hand. The Rapsodo device revealed that the metrics on his two-seam fastball—spin, break and path—were so poor that it recommended that Verlander stop throwing the pitch. Verlander immediately ditched the two-seamer, which is designed to favor movement over pure velocity.

In 48 starts with Houston, including the postseason, Verlander is 27–11 with a 2.41 ERA.

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Five months after trading for Verlander, the Astros traded for Gerrit Cole, who had just had the worst of his five seasons with the Pirates (4.26 ERA and the second-most home runs allowed in the National League). As they had done with Charlie Morton, Colin McHugh, Will Harris and Verlander, the Astros used pitch data to identify a better pitcher hidden within Cole. They told him much of the way he was using his pitches was wrong.

For instance, Cole says, “They told me to throw my slider more and my curveball harder, which was the opposite of what I was doing.” The most fundamental change was to transform Cole from a two-seam fastball pitcher who pounded the bottom of the zone to get ground balls into a four-seam fastball monster with swing-and-miss stuff at the top of the zone. The Astros convinced him that the two-seam fastball is an ineffective pitch in today’s game. As hitters have prioritized slugging over batting average, they seek higher launch angles with a more upward swing path to the ball—perfect for elevating low pitches. “I always tried to pound down to create ground balls,” Cole says, “but with the [livelier] balls and the way hitters adjusted their swing path, that two-seam was getting elevated as opposed to getting crushed to the third baseman.”

Then, the Astros helped Cole remake his four-seamer, the preferred pitch in the age of launch angle. They showed him video of his four-seam fastball spinning at 2,300 rpm—almost 100 rpm faster than the major league average. Cole threw 20 such high-spin fastballs in his first start of 2017. Yet by the end of the year Cole’s four-seamer had dissolved into a below average one, averaging only 2,164 rpm.

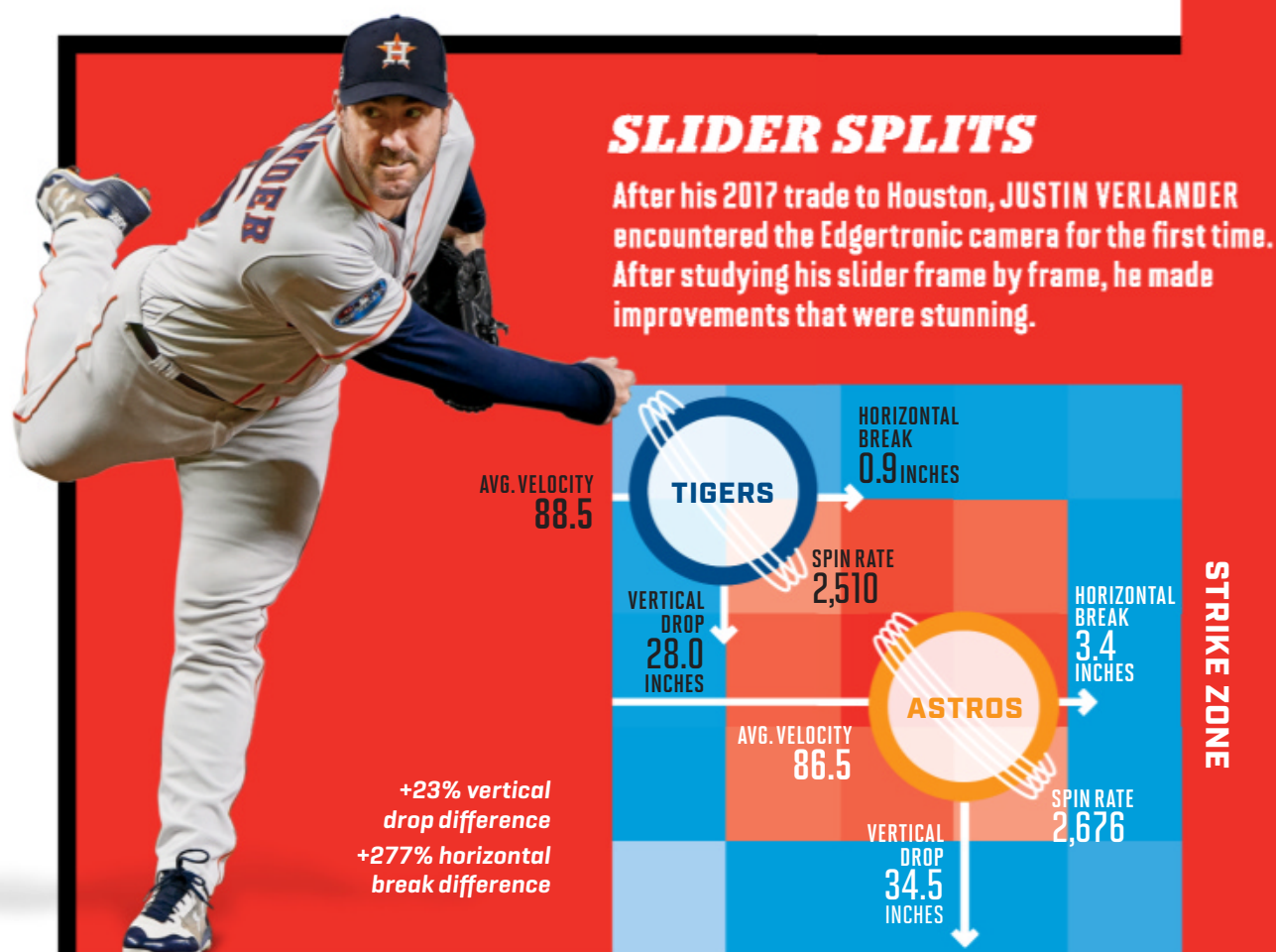
Houston knew something was off, because four-seam spin rates generally don’t vary much for established pitchers—it’s almost like a pitching fingerprint. If Cole had the ability to throw 2,300 rpm four-seamers, such pitches should be the norm for him. So the Houston staff, led by pitching coach Brent Strom, taught him how to throw a true four-seamer.

They explained that the hand and wrist should stay fully behind the ball through release to impart true north-side backspin. The faster a four-seamer backspins and stays on a north-south axis, the more it resists gravity, and the more it resists gravity the more “ride” it has through the strike zone. “Ride” means it sinks less than the hitter expects, which leads the hitter to swing under the ball. “The emphasis was on how to throw a true four-seam,” Cole says. “Step one:

make it go straight and backspin it. I wanted it to be more true and stay in the lane instead of drifting. I wasn’t really clear on how to throw it before.”

Cole would play catch every day with Verlander. Each had the same goal in throwing the ball back and forth: hit your throwing partner in the right shoulder every time, not allowing the ball to fade or drift.

Houston’s plan worked. Cole’s four-seam fastball in 2018 averaged 2,379 rpm. Batters hit .185 against it, making it the third-toughest four-seamer to hit among all major league starters, behind only Walker Buehler and Chris Sale. He cut his ERA to 2.88 and finished fifth in Cy Young Award voting.



Says the Twins’ Falvey, “Ever since Moneyball, teams have been looking for the next edge. Now we all pretty much have the same evaluation systems. But the holy grail is in development. If you can identify players who are undervalued and can find a place to make them better, that’s the edge.”

The Twins hope they have found the next undervalued pitcher based on pitch data. In January they signed Martin Pérez to a one-year, \$3.5 million contract after he had a 6.22 ERA last year with Texas while using a 93-mph two-seamer as his primary pitch. The Twins saw that Pérez’s two-seamer, four-seamer and changeup blended together with minimal separation in pitch path. As the Astros did with Cole, Min-

nesota has converted Pérez from a sinkerball pitcher into a four-seam pitcher who pounds the top of the strike zone. In his first spring training start, Pérez hit 97 mph with his fastball. According to Statcast, he had not thrown a single pitch that fast over the previous four years.

I **IT IS** harder to get a hit in the major leagues today than at any time since the DH was added in 1973. Last year, for the first time ever, there were more strikeouts than hits, and more foul balls than balls in play (meaning fans had more chances to field balls off the bat than the fielders did). Hitting has become harder less because of velocity of pitches (which has hit a three-year plateau) and more because of technology, which has spawned new, actionable knowledge about pitch shaping and sequencing to better expose hitters' weaknesses.

Such revelations have changed managing. Managers no longer rely wholly on traditional batter-pitcher historical samples (most of which are too small to be useful, anyway). Instead, managers will match the path of his pitcher's pitches against the swing path of the hitter. For instance, a manager might call on a high four-seam pitcher to combat a hitter with a high launch angle, regardless of handedness or previous matchups. "A few years ago, before I got this job Joe Maddon brought in Jake McGee, a lefty, to face a righty in Cleveland and it blew my mind," Hinch says. "It's not handedness anymore. Now it's strengths on weaknesses."

Because pitching is proactive—baseball is the only game in which the defense has the ball, with the pitcher deciding how and where it will be set in motion—technology mostly helps run prevention, not run production. The biggest benefit is that pitchers can fix flaws and make performance adjustments almost on the fly.

In 2015 the Rays installed at Tropicana Field a markerless motion capture system made by Philadelphia-based KinaTrax. The system gives a skeletal, 360-degree readout of a pitcher's delivery based on eight to 12 radar-tracking units installed around the ballpark. Since then the Cubs, Dodgers and Red Sox also have installed KinaTrax, which one source familiar with the system estimated cost about \$1 million.

The advantage of KinaTrax is that, since it doesn't require markers to measure kinematic movements, it provides data under actual game conditions, not bullpens or labs. Last season, for instance, the Cubs were flummoxed about what was wrong with Kyle Hendricks, who carried a 4.27 ERA into July. His velocity was down, and he had lost movement on his sinker and changeup.

Data from Trackman indicated that Hendricks's release point was two to three inches higher than normal, but on video the angle of his arm at release looked no different than usual. Hendricks himself could feel no difference in the way he was throwing. So the Cubs consulted KinaTrax. They



overlaid a 3D motion capture image of Hendricks's delivery from a recent poor start (with skeletal points connected by red lines) over an image from when Hendricks was throwing well (his so-called "baseline" mechanics, represented in blue). Immediately the images revealed a root cause that Hendricks could not feel and that could not be seen on video: His trunk was tilting a few degrees toward his glove side as he released the ball. There was nothing wrong with his arm angle. The trunk tilt had simply pushed the arm higher, causing his pitches to flatten. The Cubs immediately corrected the trunk tilt in the next bullpen session. Hendricks's ERA over the rest of the season was 2.65.

As with all technology, the more information KinaTrax gathers, the more reliable it becomes. Teams are able to collect kinetic images on opposing players in the team's own park. With this information they have begun to identify red



Managers no longer rely wholly on traditional batter-pitcher historical samples. Instead, a manager will match the path of his pitcher's pitches against the swing path of the hitter.

Swing Theories

Bryant adjusts his approach using a Rapsodo for hitters, which measures exit velocity, launch angle and spin.

flags in deliveries that increase injury risk, such as hand position at front foot strike. One particular rookie pitcher identified by one team as a strong injury risk blew out his elbow the next spring training.

Meanwhile, some of the two dozen or so teams that bought their first Edgertronic cameras this spring were amazed at what they learned.

"We have a young pitcher who has a chance to pitch in the big leagues this year," says Diamondbacks manager Torey Lovullo. "He would throw a breaking ball, and on the [Edgertronic] you could see drag from his finger. His finger would hit the ball after it left his hand. . . . You see the ball kind of back off its spin."

What did Arizona do with the information?

"New grip," Lovullo says. "It was just a little tweak of the grip, and it's already yielded huge dividends."

H

HITTING IS *not* proactive. Hitters must react to too many variables of ball speed and movement for the technology to work for them as it does for pitchers. That may be changing, and if it does, Kris Bryant of the Cubs will be leading the counterrevolution.

Three years ago the Cubs opened a "pitching lab" at their spring training complex in which they installed not only a pitch-tracking system but also a more advanced high-speed camera that provides almost instant playback. A pitcher could stop after every pitch to see not only the pitch metrics but also the image of the ball coming out of his hand. (The Edgertronic takes time to download and is only available after a throwing session.) This year they opened a "hitting lab" in the batting cages. Bryant is the first one in the lab every morning.

Bryant can use the force plate technology, which measures how well he uses the ground to hit. Among the many markers it can check: Does he load as close to 100% as possible on his back side? Does he apply about 200% of body mass force on his front side as the bat comes through the zone? How well does he hold his torque directionally, as opposed to spinning off the ball?

Bryant will also track how the ball leaves the bat with a Rapsodo for hitters, which measures exit velocity, launch angle and spin. Bryant grew up training to hit line drives off the back of the cage, but exit metrics have revealed that those line drives are either singles or one-hoppers to the shortstop. To hit home runs, Bryant has learned that he should be hammering balls into the top of the cage about halfway down the cage—matching the prime launch angle for slugging, which is between 20 and 25 degrees.

T

THE DODGERS take the most mechanically based approach to hitting. In addition to their 3D motion capture technology, they also have available a wireless motion capture device called K-Vest, which sells for about \$2,500. It measures a swing and the body through three planes of motion—forward and backward, side to side and rotational—providing data on the sequence and speed of the four major parts of the kinematic chain of hitting (pelvis, torso, upper arm, hands), among other metrics.

Last season, Dodgers assistant hitting coach Luis Ortiz noticed Yasiel Puig was missing or topping fastballs and crushing breaking balls. Ortiz saw that Puig's swing on fastballs appeared steeper, causing it to enter and exit the hitting zone too quickly, leaving him a smaller window to make solid contact. To better make his point, Ortiz affixed a motion capture device made by Diamond Kinnetics to the knob of his bat and had Puig swing at fastballs and breaking

balls in the cage. The device produced images of his swing paths that allowed Puig to see what Ortiz had just told him. “He’s such a visual guy,” says Ortiz, now the Rangers hitting coach. “The visual makes more sense to him.”

“I think we’re making gains,” says Brewers president David Stearns about tech-aided run production. His team built a sports science wing into its renovated spring training facility. “From a technical standpoint we are gaining a



much better understanding of the swing and what swing characteristics may or may not create damage and hard hit balls. Having said that, similar to pitching, you can do this in a variety of ways. There are no cookie-cutter mechanics.”

Y **YOU WON'T** find Jon Lester in the crowded Cubs video room poring over technology. “Will I use it? Yeah, if we have some information we get from it,” Lester says. “As far as me going in there and breaking it down myself? I’m definitely not in line to do that.”

Lester is 35 and has thrown almost 2,400 major league innings. He’s a good example of how the use of technology is roughly tied to age. He likes to read hitters and how they respond to his pitches. “The new wave of players are understanding it more because they’ve been brought up listening

to it and that’s all they know,” Lester says. “I still think we’re in that middle ground of how we’re going to use the information. Just because a guy has a high spin rate doesn’t mean he’s going to get outs. Just because a guy has a certain launch angle doesn’t mean he’s going to hit 40 homers.

“There are ways that this information will help us, but you still have to look at the players. Does a guy have the ability to compete and get outs? I think that’s the line we’re going to have to walk as we go down this numbers road.”

When Lester made his major league debut in 2006, Whitley was eight years old, in second grade. The MLB Whitley will enter this year is not only far different from the MLB Lester entered, but also far different from the MLB of even three years ago. When you listen to Whitley explain how he uses technology, you know baseball not only looks different, it also sounds different.

Says Whitley, “Pitch shape in its simplest form with a fastball . . . if you imagine it on an axis and to be able to achieve the best pitch shape you possibly can is to have as many rotations as possible while simultaneously having that fastball spin as efficiently as possible—no wobble. If you look at the data on a break chart, for instance, my fastball has two to five inches of tail. Anything in that five to zero range is perceived as cut. That’s something that I’ve noted. So my fastball is perceived as having a little cut to it. And I

try to do that. I try to be as much north and south as possible, just to get that hoppy, riding action.

“The Edgertronic is mostly for the consistency—seeing how I’m releasing the ball. Like when your wrist gets kind of sloppy, that’s a big thing for me. My wrist gets kind of soft. I have to keep a firm wrist and really leverage the ball down to get that true pitch shape.

That goes for all my pitches, especially my changeup.”

He was on a roll now. Pitch shapes, break charts, leveraging the ball, hoppy fastballs, sloppy wrists . . . this is part of the language of the game now, a language that didn’t exist a few years ago. Whitley speaks it fluently, not because he picked it up as a high school requirement, but because he grew up with it, organically. He and his fellow disrupters are only getting started.

“If I’m looking at my reps on Edgertronic,” he continued, “and there are effective reps and ineffective reps, the effective reps are when my wrist is in a pretty stable position with my forearm. When I get sloppy is when it kind of bends a little bit, like it softens and I kind of push it a little bit. That’s something that I’ve noticed. It’s different for everybody. But that’s what I’ve noticed.

“That’s cool stuff.”

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SPORTS ILLUSTRATED
MARCH 25–APRIL 1, 2019



THE PORTION of the Torah known as *Tazria-Metzora* describes the ancient rituals God commanded Jewish people to undertake were they afflicted with a variety of unfortunate ailments, including scabrous skin infections, eruptive plague and penile discharge. It's a little awkward, to say the least, for most of the 13-year-olds who discover that this is the passage they must chant and explain to their gathered families—and, even worse, to their also 13-year-old friends (*penile discharge!*)—at their bar or bat mitzvah service.

But if the boy assigned that portion by the Hebrew calendar wished he had gotten one involving, say, Moses and the Red Sea instead, he didn't show it at Congregation Albert in Albuquerque on April 21, 2007. "We all need to realize that there are people out there who may be suffering and we all need to try to do our part to relieve that suffering when we can," the 13-year-old, wearing a pin-striped suit, confidently read from his six-page, double-spaced speech. Two pages later, in a section on top of which he'd scrawled SLOWLY, he reached the heart of his message.

"When I think about the future and how I can make a difference in the world, I want to be able to use my love

World Series champion. All-Star
ALEX BREGMAN has done it all. But,
best, his celebrity barely registers.
putting his life online. YouTube.
He doesn't just want to get huge
baseball back in the spotlight.





Game MVP. At 24,
like all of MLB's
That's why he's
Twitter. Instagram.
—he wants to put

“How do we make baseball as marketable as the NBA and NFL?” Bregman asks. “How do we blow this game up and make our stars huge?”

of the game of baseball to be a good example and a good person,” he said. “I want to be a professional athlete who plays for the love of the game, never quits trying to give my best and is a good role model for all of the kids who look up to baseball players.”

The congregants must have smiled. It was a dream harbored by millions of boys at that optimistic age, just before hard realities arrive for almost all of them, Jewish or not. This particular one stood a head shorter than his mother, who herself was only 5' 4", and he struggled to hold the Torah's moderately heavy scroll. But Alexander David Bregman was completely unabashed about his intentions. “There never was a Plan B,” he says.

To fulfill Plan A, Bregman came to rely on a more modern text. One day, when he was in high school, he happened upon the YouTube video *How Bad Do You Want It? (Success)*. It depicted a punishing workout performed by running back Giavanni Ruffin, set to rousing music and an oration delivered by a motivational speaker named Eric Thomas, also known as ET The Hip-Hop Preacher.

Bregman was enthralled. The video now has 45 million views, many thousands of which belong to him. He watched it every school day before going out at 5 a.m. to run up sand dunes until he puked, then viewed it again after returning home at 10 p.m. with bloody palms from the many hours of batting practice he'd taken. He'd recite the Hip-Hop Preacher's sermon to push himself through his adolescent exhaustion. *When you want to succeed as bad as you want to breathe, then you'll be successful. And, You gotta want to be successful so bad that you forget to eat. And, If you go to sleep, you might miss the opportunity to be successful.*

Just 11 years after his bar mitzvah, and though he has only grown to 5' 10" (maybe 5' 9"), Bregman has already come through on most of the improbable promises he made at Congregation Albert. He is the third baseman for the Astros. He has won a World Series ring, earned an All-Star Game MVP award and finished fifth in last season's AL MVP voting. At 24, he is, says Houston manager A.J. Hinch, “a monster within the game.”

In other words, Alex Bregman is already a star. Now, though, he wants to become famous. In baseball in 2019, those are no longer the same thing—which would have

The Chai Life

At his bar mitzvah (right), Bregman predicted he'd be a big leaguer, but even he might not have expected to hit 31 homers as a 24-year-old.

been a surprise to his 13-year-old self, who vowed to not just be a major leaguer but an influential one. “How do we make baseball as marketable as the NBA and NFL?” Bregman asks today. “How do we blow this game up and make our stars huge?”

That's the problem Bregman is trying to solve via the digitally savvy methods of not only basketball and football players, but of the Hip-Hop Preacher too. He wants nothing less than to captivate a new generation of fans, securing the future of the sport he loves. The effort starts at his dining table.

T **THERE'S NO FIRE POLE**, no trampoline and no free vending machine, but in most other ways Bregman's five-story townhouse in Houston is exactly the type of residence that any 13-year-old boy would fantasize about owning were he to become a pro athlete. It is stuffed with trophies, jerseys and small-batch sneakers. The garage shelters a Range Rover. One room is entirely reserved for watching football and playing *Fortnite* on its many screens. A private chef, Chef Lauren, prepares three meals a day—none of them featuring seafood, which Bregman loathes.

The best part, though, is that Bregman lives with his three



LOREN ELLIOTT (TOP); COURTESY OF THE BREGMAN FAMILY



says, which seems farfetched but is only slightly so. JuJu's jersey finished 10th in the league's official sales in 2018, impressive for a second-year player who was at best only the third-most traditionally famous player on his own team—neither Ben Roethlisberger nor Antonio Brown made the list—and surprising unless you are, say, one of the nearly 750,000 people who subscribe to his YouTube channel. Smith-Schuster is a *lot* more influential and beloved than most people think. This offseason, Breg-

man resolved to become MLB's answer to JuJu.

Arranged around the Jack Daniel's table were lights and cameras overseen by the fifth member of Bregman's off-season household: Alex Scofield—Sco, to the Boys—who is the younger brother of Bregman's agent, Brodie Scofield, and serves as Bregman's full-time social media producer. Since launching his YouTube channel last Halloween, Breg and the Boys have posted nearly 80 videos, about four a week. They drove around Houston giving \$100 tips to unsuspecting drive-through workers. They worked out with Alex Rodriguez in California. They went undercover as awful umpires in a youth baseball game, whose players happily swarmed them—at least, happily swarmed one of them—when they finally removed their masks.

That last one garnered 700,000 views. In fact, the whole enterprise worked. According to *opendorse*, an athlete marketing platform, Bregman earned 4.3 million social engagements between late October and mid-February, nearly 2½ times as many as baseball's second-most engaging player, Blue Jays pitcher Marcus Stroman. Still, Bregman's total would have put him just 18th in the NFL (JuJu was third, behind Beckham and Tom Brady) and 25th in the NBA, trailing the Lakers' zero-time All-Star

best friends: the Boys. He ran up Albuquerque's sand dunes next to Tyler Straub, a former Royals minor leaguer; played travel ball with Blair Beck, who's now in the independent Frontier League with Straub; and attended LSU with Mike Papierski, a switch-hitting catcher with the Astros' Class A club. Despite their varying levels of accomplishment, they have much in common, including passions for football and *Fortnite*, of course, as well as for working out and the word *dece*, which is short for *decent* but actually means pretty damn good. Much about their lives is *dece*.

This winter the quartet began each day at 10:15 by drinking a delicious beets-based juice fresh squeezed by Chef Lauren. As they assembled around the only piece of furniture that Bregman picked out himself—the dining table, which is fashioned out of Jack Daniel's barrels—they immediately assumed different roles: that of Bregman's co-stars.

That's because another thing Bregman and the Boys share is their love for athletes who document their lives and connect with their fans online: LeBron James, Conor McGregor, Odell Beckham Jr. and especially the one they refer to only by his first name, JuJu.

He is JuJu Smith-Schuster, the Steelers' 22-year-old wide-out. "He has the No. 1-selling jersey in the NFL," Bregman

Brandon Ingram. The NBA's top draw—James, naturally—had almost 85 million engagements, five times more than MLB's top 10 combined.

This last fact underlines baseball's biggest problem: its difficulty connecting with and inspiring Bregman's generation, one that views digital life not as distinct from reality, but fully integrated into it. According to *Sports Business Journal*, as of 2016 the average MLB fan was 57, seven years older than that of the NFL and 15 than that of the NBA. Baseball has not developed the crossover stars—authentic, cool and intensely competitive in an old way but brashly playful in a new one—who dot rival leagues. Bregman believes there are a number of reasons for that failure, among them apathy by both MLB and its players as well as a fear of upsetting the gatekeepers of what remains a culturally hidebound sport.

But Bregman has never been lazy—"What else would I be doing with my downtime, sitting here reading a book or whatever other people do?" he asks—and he is unafraid. "I think you have to have this thing called *feel*," he says. "You can do whatever you want to do if you have a feel for the situation. At the end of the day, I know I'm a good person, so I'm not worried about anything bad that could happen on the Internet."

Bregman's league and club are generally supportive. "I like it—for him," says Hinch, a former Stanford psychology major. "As long as he controls it, his perspectives haven't changed, and it hasn't become more show than substance. I think time will test if he can maintain that."

Bregman has no doubt that he can, and that his off-the-field activities will only further allow him to do all the other things he once promised Congregation Albert he would: to make a difference in the world, to be a role model not just to kids but to a new breed of baseball stars. His efforts are also fun and, he admits, profitable—if modestly, so far.

Even so, he knows that no one will care about any of it unless he—like LeBron and JuJu—continues to be more than *dece* when and where it really counts.

B **BREGMAN IS** only about to turn 25, but he already has the most important walkoff hit in the Astros' 57-season history. It was the two-out single he lashed off Dodgers closer Kenley Jansen's first pitch to him in the 10th inning of Game 5 of the 2017 World Series, the one that tilted the matchup to Houston. "He continually slows his heartbeat down when the rest of the building is jumping

out of their seats," Hinch says. Bregman is able to do that because he has prepared himself to do it.

The night before Game 5, lying in his bed in his townhouse after Los Angeles had knotted the Series, he had visualized the contours of his next at bat against Jansen. Hours earlier he had homered off the All-Star, although it hadn't been quite enough to prevent a Houston loss. Jansen had thrown him a slider. "In my head, I'm like, 'No chance he throws me a slider again. I'm looking for a cutter,'" Bregman recalls thinking. Jansen's first pitch was a cutter.



For Insta

Bregman has 500,000 Instagram followers, but that's tiny next to big names in the NBA and the NFL.

In many ways Bregman had been destined for such a moment. "The whole family, generation after generation, has been obsessed with the game of baseball," says Sam, Alex's father. Sam's dad, Stan, was the general counsel for the Washington Senators and later on, in 1973, represented the slugger Dick Allen in negotiations that resulted in the game's largest-ever contract: three years and \$750,000. Both Sam and his brother, Ben, played at New Mexico, but they went no further; Sam ended up opening up a successful law firm with his wife, Jackie, whom he had met at law school. It didn't take them long to realize that the first of their three children was different from all other Bregmans.

Alex was the kid who, in games of touch football with older boys, would dive headfirst onto the concrete of the cul de sac to haul in a pass. When a big trial meant that Sam was too busy to play catch, Alex would hurl a baseball at the same spot on a cinder-block wall in the backyard until, after five years, he broke through it. "I was thrilled," Sam says. "His mother wasn't."

Sam never pushed him—he didn’t have to—but when Alex was 10 he introduced him to the family credo: TTFU. Toughen the F--- Up. “I might not be the greatest parent when it comes to language,” Sam says.

Sam didn’t have to remind his son of the motto often, but he did after a pregame grounder one game into Alex’s senior season at Albuquerque Academy. Bregman had promised LSU that he would play there unless he was a first-round pick, but a bad hop shattered that possibility along with his throwing hand’s middle finger. *TTFU*.

When the Diamondbacks called to tell him they were considering taking him in the second round, Bregman told them not to waste their time—that he was going to college, and that he hoped their first-rounder worked out. He chose number 30 for his freshman year at LSU to reflect the number of MLB teams that had passed on him.

Three years later Arizona had the No. 1 pick and another chance to draft Bregman, an All-America shortstop with more extra-base hits than strikeouts. The D-Backs took Vanderbilt shortstop Dansby Swanson instead, leaving Bregman for Houston. The Astros believed in Bregman so deeply that they moved him *up* in the batting order after he began his major league career by going 1 for 32. (*TTFU*, texted Sam.) Last sea-

In leftfield, though, Andrew Benintendi was playing shallow. He laid out to snag the ball with the fingertips of his glove, denying a series-tying hit. Boston sent Houston home the following evening.

TTFU, texted Sam. The next day Bregman was in the gym, preparing for 2019 with a new set of goals: “Win a World Series. Win a World Series MVP. Have the best year of my life on the field. And then blow up off it.”

I **IT WAS** a Monday in January, a few weeks before he would report for spring training in West Palm Beach, and Bregman had a packed schedule. He and the Boys were up early to shoot a boxing-themed music video for a song the Houston hip-hop artist Paul Wall had written for him. At 10:15, they gathered around the Jack Daniel’s table to record a video podcast while sipping Chef Lauren’s beet juice.

At noon he drove the Range Rover to Minute Maid Park to continue rehabbing from the surgery he’d had earlier in the month to remove bone chips from his throwing elbow, a periodically painful condition that he’d refused to divulge to anyone for three years until he woke up in December and found the joint locked at a 90-degree angle. “We probably had the most public surgery in the history of baseball,” Bregman says. Sco had documented everything but the procedure itself for YouTube, including Bregman’s drug-addled post-op stupor in which he promised to win 14 straight MVPs. “Maybe I meant 14 straight All-Star appearances,” he says. “Mike Trout’s still in our league.” Anyway, the intimate video—*Breg and The Boys Ep. 8*—has now been viewed 60,000 times, and Bregman recovered quickly enough to hit a home run in his second spring training game.

After his rehab and a workout, it was time to produce more content—or *footie*, as he calls it, as in footage—this time at the request of the Astros. Reid Ryan, the club’s president, had asked if Bregman might be up for popping into the ticket office. Of course he was. He bounded in, to the obvious delight of the staff

members, many of whom kept replicas of his jersey in their cubicles, and jumped on the phone. “Jim Crane”—the Astros’ owner—“told me he’s not gonna give me a contract extension unless you buy a full season,” he pitched one customer, successfully. “I feel like the Wolf of Wall Street right now!” he shouted, drawing laughs.

Before leaving, he was shown a mockup of the team’s new media guide. The cover featured a photo of him with his arms crossed, filtered in such a way to make their vasculature pop, beneath this year’s slogan: TAKE IT BACK,



“We probably had the most public surgery in the history of baseball,” Bregman says. His social media manager had documented everything but the procedure itself.

son Bregman led the team in home runs (31), RBIs (103), OPS (.926) and almost everything else, while ranking as one of the 12 toughest hitters in the league to strike out.

He also came fairly close to leading them to another World Series. When he stepped to the plate against Craig Kimbrel with two outs in the bottom of the ninth of Game 4 of the ALCS, he had the night before visualized how he would swing at a first-pitch rising fastball from the Red Sox’ closer and drive it to left for another walk-off. “Off the bat, I thought it was déjà vu from the World Series,” he says.

Bregging Rights

Bregman led the AL in doubles last year (51), was fifth in OPS (.926) and moved seamlessly between his usual third base and shortstop.

as in the title. “Forearms look *dece*,” Bregman said, approvingly, to more laughs.

That eagerness to connect with others—online or IRL—is often on full display inside the clubhouse. When first baseman Yuli Gurriel, having recently arrived from Cuba not knowing a word of English, entered it for the first time in 2016, he was surprised to be immediately greeted by a much younger rookie with a twinkle in his eye. “*Cómo está, mi hijo!*” Bregman shouted, using the sometimes butchered Spanish that was the only subject in which he usually earned A’s in high school, because it was the only one he thought could help him as a major leaguer. Now the two are inseparable, chattering all day as they help each other improve in their respective languages. Gurriel says Bregman particularly likes learning all the *malas palabras*—the bad words.

Bregman believes that a more closely bonded team is a better one. There was also a hidden motivation behind the Instagram story he posted before Game 3 of the ALCS in October. He titled it *lil pregame video work*, and it showed himself, centerfielder George Springer and second baseman José Altuve hitting back-to-back-to-back homers earlier in the season off Nathan Eovaldi, who happened to be Boston’s Game 3 starter. He did it for three reasons. One, he was trying to gin up the narrative as athletes in other sports do—say, McGregor vs. Mayweather—but is not yet quite welcome in baseball. Two, he was trying to get into Eovaldi’s head. Three, he was publicly laying down a gauntlet for himself: *I did this, now I have to back it up*.

He only backed it up partway. While he went 2-for-2 with an RBI double and a walk against Eovaldi in Game 3, the righty blew him away with a 101-mph fastball in the eighth inning of Game 5. “Post *that!*” Red Sox starter David Price screamed from the opposing dugout, which Bregman didn’t



mind. “I’ll say all that stuff, but if you get me after I do it, I’ll be the first to say: You got me,” he says. “That was some serious cheddar. He got me.”

♦ **FTEN, BREGMAN’S** use of social media is much quieter. In December, for instance, a relative of a 36-year-old Astros fan, the father of two young children, messaged Bregman on Instagram to say that the fan was dying of Stage 4 brain cancer, and that he’d asked to be buried in Bregman’s jersey. “A signed note or jersey would make his entire life,” the relative wrote. Bregman asked for his address. That weekend Bregman and the Boys, leaving their cameras behind, drove up to the man’s house and spent an hour at his bedside, surrounded by his family.

Two days later Bregman received another message from the relative. “He died this morning,” she wrote. “We are so grateful you saw him and made him laugh before he made his way home.”

It’s a lot of power for a 24-year-old to have, but Bregman has long sought it out. It’s what he meant when he told Congregation Albert that he wanted to use his love of baseball to be a good example. It was also a reminder that there is more to life than *footie*.

Another came near the end of last May. Bregman and Justin Verlander, the Astros’ 36-year-old ace, were drinking coffee together in the clubhouse when Verlander stared into his eyes. “Dude, you look tired today,” he said. “How much do you sleep?”

The Hip Hop Preacher’s YouTube wisdom (*If you go to sleep, you might miss the opportunity to be successful*) echoed in Bregman’s head. In high school he had permitted himself perhaps six hours a night, but now he was up to seven or eight. Verlander was stunned. “Bro, you have to be sleeping 10 to 12 hours,” he said. “Eight’s for normal people who don’t tear their body down as much as you do.”

Bregman began turning in at midnight and setting his alarm clock for 10. While he had begun June with just five home runs, he ended the month with 16. “Verlander knew what he was talking about,” Bregman says.

The right influencer can make all the difference. □

THE PROSPECT

JUNIOR PARTNER

Manny Machado is the new headliner in San Diego, but he's happy to move over and make room for **FERNANDO TATIS JR.**

AS THE BALL flew into the warm January night in San Pedro de Macoris, Fernando Tatis Jr. took one step, then two out of the batter's box. The Padres' shortstop of the future had made a winner of his Dominican Winter League team with a walk-off, three-run homer in a playoff game, sending his hometown crowd into a frenzy and his teammates streaming onto the field. Putting both hands on the knob of his bat, Tatis chucked it sky-high before skipping around the bases,

by
JON TAYLER

screaming with joy. "I felt so happy for him," recalls the manager of the victorious Estrellas Orientales, Fernando Tatis Sr. "I don't think anybody cared if he's flipping a bat to the moon or something."

San Diego hopes that moment was just a preview from the prospect ranked No. 2 by both *Baseball America* and MLB.com. The 20-year-old son of the longtime MLB utility man, Tatis stands 6' 3," weighs 185 pounds and looks more similar to Manny Machado—who had nearly those same measurements as a rookie—than to his contact-hitting dad. He is, quite literally, not your father's Fernando Tatis.

But for all his bravado, Tatis Jr. is still susceptible to goose bumps. That's what happened over dinner at Mastro's Steakhouse during All-Star week in D.C. last July, when he got to meet one of his idols: Machado. The players, who are both represented by Dan Lozano, spent three hours talking shop and by night's end had swapped numbers.

Soon they won't need to text each other to stay in touch. In February, Machado signed a 10-year, \$300 million deal with San Diego. His next move was just as surprising: In deference to Tatis, he gave up his preference to play shortstop and moved back to third. "He's a beast," Machado said of Tatis. "He reminds me of myself when I was 19 years old and got called up. He can do it all."

Tatis says that the gesture blew him away. "I'm not gonna lie, that makes me feel special," he says. "That means I've got to work even more."

With Machado, 26, joining him on the left side of the infield, the future in San Diego looks sunny. The Padres have the game's most loaded farm system: Nine of their prospects made *Baseball America's* latest Top 100 list, the most in MLB. Machado is ready for that youth movement to begin now, lobbying hard for Tatis—who has yet to play above Double A—to make the Opening Day roster. "If he's in there, we're going to be a dangerous team," Machado told reporters after his first spring game.

Tatis says he has little use for baseball's stodgy unwritten rules—and plans on making the Padres both good *and* exciting, which is fine with his dad. During his 13-year career, Tatis Sr. followed a single rule: "Never disrespect anybody." He didn't once loft lumber in 3,468 plate appearances—including after hitting his second grand slam *in the same inning* in 1999—but he's happy to see a new generation show so much passion. "They're going to bring more to this game," says Tatis Sr., who retired in 2010. "The game cannot stay one way. You've got to make it better. You've got to make the fans watch more."

His son agrees. "It's going to keep evolving," Tatis Jr. says, with a smile. "Bat flips are going to be legal."



NILS NILSEN



BY JACK DICKEY

TRANSACTION WIRED

The essential five-minute guide to the most important wheeling and dealing of the offseason. Also, what the Mets did



PLODDING—THAT WAS the pace of the just-concluded offseason, with general managers working at a tempo reminiscent of Steve Trachsel's. Waiting yielded to more waiting, which yielded to more waiting still, and eventually to two big contracts that set records but failed to knock the baseball world off its axis. But there was still movement! What follows is a non-exhaustive list of this winter's biggest transactions to get fans up to speed before Opening Day. Don't worry if you slept through the offseason; the Indians did too! Now, though, it's time to wake up.

► PADRES SIGN MANNY MACHADO

The Marlins' 2018 ought to be remembered as the most disgraceful season in the disgraceful history of that disgraceful franchise. But did you know: With a week left in the season, the even more disgraceful Padres actually trailed Miami in the NL standings. (San Diego would win four of its last six to finish 66–96.) For all the pre-free-agency talk about Machado becoming the final piece for a contending team, he chose instead to become the foundation of a from-scratch rebuild in a city that hasn't seen the playoffs since 2006. Funny how that worked out! He will be surrounded by ballyhooed phenoms (shortstop Fernando Tatis Jr., catcher Francisco Mejía) but also by a shorthanded rotation, making a winning season unlikely. Whatever happens in 2019 matters less than the tone it sets for the future: San Diego signed Machado for \$300 million over 10 years but his opt-out clause allows him to skip town after five.

► PHILLIES SIGN BRYCE HARPER, ANDREW MCCUTCHEN, DAVID ROBERTSON; TRADE FOR JEAN SEGURA, J.T. REALMUTO

After half a decade of supposedly productive losing, Phillies fans are ready for the team to win again. Last year's squad did win 80 games for the first time since 2012, but a lifeless finish (capped by an 8–20 September) spoiled any good feelings. Ownership teased the prospect of spending “stupid” money on the '19 club, and the \$330 million lavished on the streaky floppy-haired future DH may yet qualify. (Yes, the NL will indeed have a DH before Harper's 13-year contract is finished.) But that deal followed shrewd upgrades at shortstop (Segura), closer (Robertson) and catcher (Realmuto). The rotation is young (Jake Arrieta aside) and improving; righty Aaron Nola is a star. Expectations are justifiably high, but a team so overhauled could take time to gel. Good thing Philly fans are known for their patience.



MASTERPRESS/GETTY IMAGES



➤ **METS TRADE FOR ROBINSON CANÓ, EDWIN DÍAZ; SIGN JED LOWRIE, WILSON RAMOS, JEURYS FAMILIA**

It's not fair to talk about an NL East team being stupid with its money without touching on the Mets. With a Manny Machado-shaped hole in their infield, they traded for 36-year-old Robinson Canó and signed 34-year-old Jed Lowrie; needing a closer, with Adam Ottavino, Craig Kimbrel and Zack Britton among the available free agents, they traded two recent first-round picks for the Mariners' Edwin Díaz. At catcher, they signed the never-fully-healthy Wilson Ramos instead of the more dependable Yasmani Grandal. And yet Jason Vargas, who was practically throwing batting practice last year, kept a rotation spot. The club New York fields in 2019 is indisputably better than last year's; unfortunately, despite a historic season from ace Jacob deGrom, that team won only 77 games in a much less competitive division.

➤ **REDS TRADE FOR YASIEL PUIG, MATT KEMP, ALEX WOOD, SONNY GRAY, TANNER ROARK**

What do you do when your team has gone an MLB-worst 343–467 over the last five years but all that losing has yet to yield—with apologies to the promising Luis Castillo—a starting rotation of the future? When it would be pointless to recruit a top free agent, since the next winning core is at least two years away? When the city doesn't even have Marvin Lewis to kick around anymore? One solution is just to lose. It's en vogue, and the Reds are good at it. But another, apparently, is to trade for a sack of impending free agents and hope they have stellar walk years. It's not the worst idea. Puig had a 5.1 WAR in 2014; Gray, whom the Reds extended, had a 5.3 WAR in '15; Roark had a 5.6 WAR in '16; Wood had a 3.4 WAR in '17; even Kemp showed signs of life

TOM VERDUCCI'S **AWARD PICKS**



AL: AARON JUDGE
YANKEES

By slightly cutting down on his 34% swing-and-miss rate, he will be able to put up monster numbers.



NL: NOLAN ARENADO
ROCKIES

He has finished in the top eight in MVP voting each of the last four years [third in 2018]. It's time.

MVP



AL: TREVOR BAUER
INDIANS

His ERA dropped from 4.19 in 2017 to 2.21 in '18. Expect more of last season's version of Bauer in 2019.



NL: JACOB DEGROM
METS

With 29 straight starts giving up three or fewer earned runs, he's set for back-to-back Cy's.

CY YOUNG



AL: VLAD GUERRERO JR.
BLUE JAYS

Don't mind that he starts the year on the injured list. Vladito is a plug-and-play impact hitter.



NL: VÍCTOR ROBLES
NATIONALS

Only 21, the speedy Robles gets the job in center after posting a .392 OBP in the minors.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

in 2018. If they all perform well, Cincy threatens for a wild card. If some struggle, the Reds will too, but they can flip the high performers for prospects. And if they all flop, well, in five years no one will remember they played there at all.

> **CARDINALS TRADE FOR PAUL GOLDSCHMIDT**

Speaking of forgetting: Paul Goldschmidt is a Cardinal! Huh! The hitter with the best OPS (minimum 3,000 PAs) over the past six seasons not named Mike Trout was traded to a historic franchise and perennial contender, and it's an offseason footnote. Some of this surely has to do with Goldschmidt's low, low, low profile—he doesn't even have a Twitter account—but it's also because he's not exactly a fit for the Redbirds. Matt Carpenter had the 2018 team's best season while primarily manning first; José Martínez, who was the team's second-best hitter by adjusted OPS+, also played a lot of first. In '19, Carpenter will be at third and Martínez on the bench (with occasional duty in right), which strips the trade of some of its value. Then again, when all the Cubs did was sign ex-Cards utilityman Daniel Descalso, it's hard to nitpick.

> **ANGELS SIGN CODY ALLEN, JONATHAN LUCROY, MATT HARVEY**

Rob Manfred says this column is dragging and we've lost millennials. Skip it!

> **YANKEES SIGN ADAM OTTAVINO, RE-SIGN ZACK BRITTON**

Some surprising news sprang from Zach Britton in February: He is now Zack Britton, with a K. He would have always been Zack, he said—his legal name is Zackary—but the Orioles, his original club, had listed his name as Zach, and he hadn't wanted to complain. As seismic as that was, though, it mattered less than the January announcements that Britton would be sticking in the Bronx and that Ottavino, formerly a Rockie, would join him. New York has assembled the most fearsome late-game corps in history, with five closer-caliber arms. In 2018, opponents hit .218 against Yankees relievers from the seventh inning on—and that number is likely to go down. It's easy to focus on adding bullpen help when the offense has exceeded 850 runs two years in a row.

> **RED SOX RE-SIGN STEVE PEARCE, NATHAN EOVALDI**

The easiest offseason, though, is the one that follows a championship. Boston rewarded Pearce and Eovaldi for their valiant postseason service, and then took the rest of the winter off. □

Adam Ottavino

> **HOW THEY'LL FINISH**

NATIONAL LEAGUE

EAST	W-L	GB
1. PHILLIES	92-70	—
2. NATIONALS	85-77	7
3. METS	84-78	8
4. BRAVES	83-79	9
5. MARLINS	59-103	33
CENTRAL	W-L	GB
1. BREWERS	95-67	—
2. CARDINALS	87-75	8
3. CUBS	86-76	9
4. REDS	81-81	14
5. PIRATES	71-91	24
WEST	W-L	GB
1. DODGERS	100-62	—
2. PADRES	83-79	17
3. ROCKIES	81-81	19
4. DIAMONDBACKS	70-92	30
5. GIANTS	62-100	38

AMERICAN LEAGUE

EAST	W-L	GB
1. YANKEES	97-65	—
2. RED SOX	96-66	1
3. RAYS	90-72	7
4. BLUE JAYS	75-87	22
5. ORIOLES	57-105	40
CENTRAL	W-L	GB
1. TWINS	90-72	—
2. INDIANS	89-73	1
3. WHITE SOX	75-87	15
4. ROYALS	68-94	22
5. TIGERS	66-96	24
WEST	W-L	GB
1. ASTROS	103-59	—
2. A'S	84-78	19
3. ANGELS	81-81	22
4. MARINERS	71-91	32
5. RANGERS	69-93	34

> **POSTSEASON PREDICTIONS**

WILD CARD

CARDINALS over CUBS

DIVISION SERIES

DODGERS over CARDINALS
PHILLIES over BREWERS

CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

PHILLIES over DODGERS

WILD CARD

RAYs over RED SOX

DIVISION SERIES

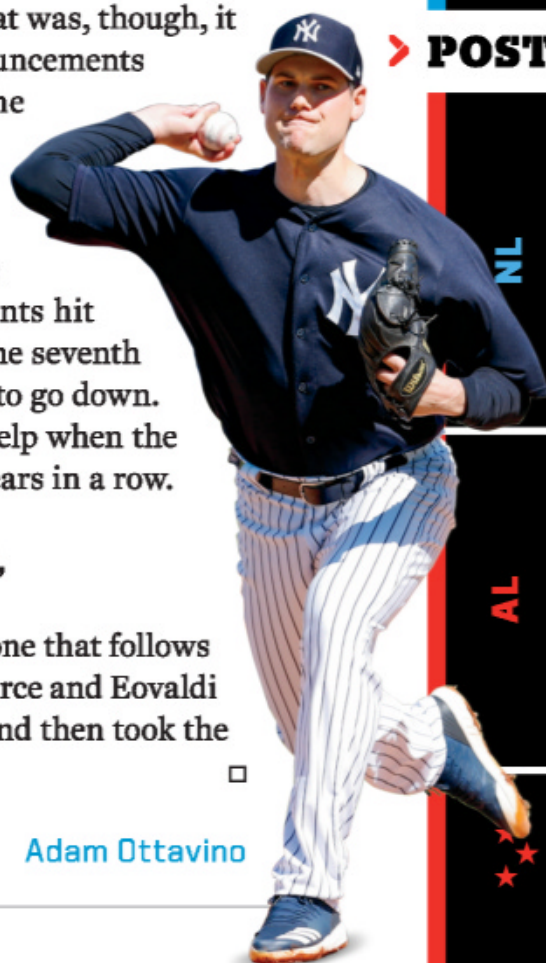
ASTROS over RAYs
YANKEES over TWINS

CHAMPIONSHIP SERIES

ASTROS over YANKEES

WORLD SERIES

ASTROS over PHILLIES



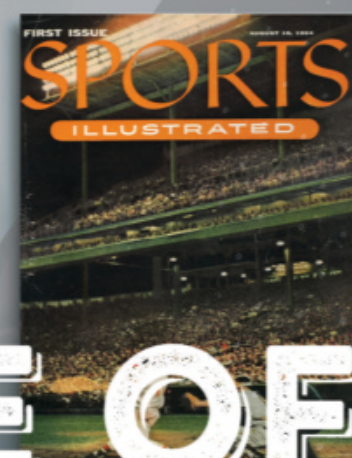
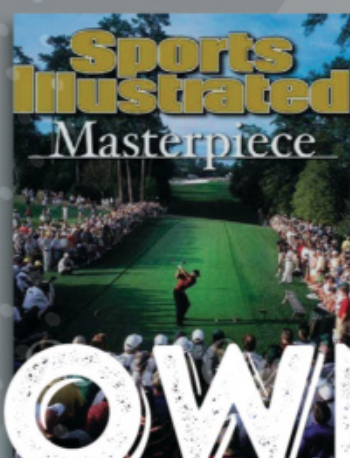
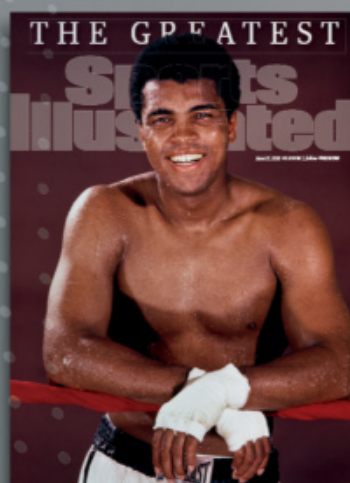
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LET'S CUT THROUGH THE JIBBER JABBER.

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Phil in the Blanks

For a record \$330 million, Bryce Harper made a 13-year commitment to Philadelphia. We predict year one yields the club's first pennant since 2009.



SCOUT'S TAKE

A rival scout sizes up the competition.



THE PAYOFF PITCH

Entries by **Joe Sheehan**, who zeros in on the one thing to watch for each team. [Yes, even the Orioles.]



OVER/UNDER

Win totals from **Westgate Las Vegas SuperBook**
Text by **Jon Taylor**



FANTASY BREAKOUTS

By **Michael Beller** and **Kaelen Jones**
Stats from the 2018 season



PHOTOGRAPH BY
MIKE EHRMANN
Getty images

SCOO



HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL in baseball—unless it doesn't. The game has lately become as stratified as the rest of society, with a third of the teams choosing not to compete and a handful of elites poised to lap the rest. So we've sorted clubs into three tiers (CONTENDERS, IN LIMBO and TANKERS) and by league rather than by division. Some familiar names—the Astros, Yankees, Dodgers and Brewers—represent the top tier of the top tier, with other usual suspects (hello, Miami!) bringing up the unwatchable rear. As ever, it is the meaty middle of the pack that presents the most intrigue. Can the remade Mets hang with the remade Phillies? Are the A's and the Rays well-stocked enough to repeat their small-market magic? Will the Cubs and the Indians regret their offseason inaction? And . . . the Reds? What is even going on there? We're about to find out. —*Jack Dickey*

MLB PREVIEW 2019

UTING

REPORTS



Flight Plan

With Bellinger leading the way, the Dodgers are the clear favorites in the NL West.

LINEUP

CF A.J. Pollock
.257/.348 OBP/.396 SLG

SS Corey Seager
.267/.348 OBP/.396 SLG

3B Justin Turner
.312/.406 OBP/.518 SLG

RF Cody Bellinger
.260/.25 HR/76 RBI

1B Max Muncy
.263/.35 HR/.582 SLG

2B Chris Taylor
.254/.17 HR/9 SB

LF Joc Pederson
.248/.25 HR/.522 SLG

C Austin Barnes
.205/.329 OBP/.484 SLG

BENCH

OF/IF Kiké Hernández
.256/.21 HR/.470 SLG

IF David Freese
.296/.359 OBP/.471 SLG

**THE
PAYOFF
PITCH**

➤ **FOR A** two-year period, 2016 and '17, Corey Seager was the best player in the National League after Nolan Arenado and Kris Bryant. Seager was a good defensive shortstop who slashed .302/.370/.496 with 48 home runs. He missed the last five months of the 2018 season with a torn right ulnar collateral ligament that required Tommy John surgery, but he's healthy and expected to be an Opening Day starter. It's a credit to the

depth the Dodgers have on their roster—some of which they used to trade for Seager's replacement in '18, Manny Machado—that they lost an MVP candidate and still won the NL West for a sixth straight time. Los Angeles mostly stayed out of the free-agent market this winter, knowing one of the best players in the game was coming back. A healthy Seager returning is like signing a five-win player—except Seager, 24, will make just \$4 million this year.

Dodgers

CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

➤ **KEY QUESTION** They can't count on Clayton Kershaw being the Man anymore. Is Walker Buehler ready to be the ace? His arsenal is tremendous. The only worry is the jump in workload—he almost doubled his innings last year. But if he wins the Cy Young, I wouldn't be surprised.

➤ **UNDERRATED** Cody Bellinger is a 30-home run guy, but people don't appreciate how he developed into an above-average outfielder, when the Dodgers thought they could just hide him out there. I love how he adjusted after a terrible 2017 postseason. Now he's an MVP candidate.

➤ **ON THE CUSP** Their rotation is good, but their Triple A rotation has a chance to be better than a few major league staffs. Dustin May has the biggest upside, Tony Gonsolin can be a difference-maker this year: He's touching the high 90s and could log some key innings in October.

➤ **LAST LICKS** I thought with all the platooning, no way everyone was gonna be happy last year. Credit to Dave Roberts for managing that clubhouse. . . . They can deal some of those arms and get guys at the trade deadline. If they don't make the World Series, it'll be a disappointment.

**FANTASY
BREAKOUT**

After logging 137½ innings in his rookie year, **WALKER BUEHLER**, unleashed, will have top 10 starter potential.

ROTATION

LH Clayton Kershaw
9 W/2.73 ERA/1.04 WHP

RH Walker Buehler
8 W/2.62 ERA/0.96 WHP

LH Hyun-Jin Ryu
7 W/1.97 ERA/1.01 WHP

LH Rich Hill
11 W/3.66 ERA/1.12 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Kenley Jansen
38 SV/3.01 ERA/10.3 K9

RH Joe Kelly
4.39 ERA/1.36 WHP/9.3 K9

LH Scott Alexander
3.68 ERA/1.27 WHP/7.6 K9

MANAGER
Dave Roberts



**OVER
UNDER**

➤ **93.5**

Corey Seager's back and their young starters are ready to contribute. Even with Clayton Kershaw limited, the Dodgers are a lock to win the NL West for a seventh straight year.



LINEUP

CF Lorenzo Cain
.308/10 HR/30 SB
RF Christian Yelich
.326/36 HR/.598 SLG
1B Jesús Aguilar
.274/35 HR/.539 SLG
3B Travis Shaw
.241/32 HR/.480 SLG
LF Ryan Braun
.254/.469 SLG/11 SB
2B Mike Moustakas
.251/28 HR/.459 SLG
C Yasmani Grandal
.241/24 HR/.349 OBP
SS Orlando Arcia
.236/3 HR/.307 SLG
BENCH
IF/OF Hernán Pérez
.253/9 HR/11 SB
1B/OF Eric Thames
.219/16 HR/.478 SLG



Brewers CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** In the playoffs last year, Josh Hader made Cubs hitters look like minor leaguers. He was 2016 Andrew Miller good. The bullpen is so important to this team and that's why Hader's health is key. They can't ride him as they did last year [when he threw 81½ innings]. Miller wasn't the same after his 2016 season—will that happen with Hader?

> **UNDERRATED** Signing Mike Moustakas was a great deal. He can hit 30 bombs and he's so good in the clubhouse. A lot of people worry about him at second, but with all the positioning and shifts, he's not going to be that bad in the field.

> **ON THE CUSP** He was demoted twice last season, but you saw in the playoffs how talented Orlando Arcia is. He's learned how to get better pitches to hit, and you're just beginning to see his power. To have pop in the bottom of the order is huge.

> **LAST LICKS** They have a great bullpen and lineup, but can they win with no true ace? . . . This team is analytics heavy, and Craig Counsell mixes well with the front office. . . . They have more pieces to trade than the Cubs, so they can make a move at the deadline that gives them an edge.



FANTASY BREAKOUT

After four years in Dodger Stadium, YASMANI GRANDAL moves to hitter-friendly Miller Park, where 30 homers is possible.

ROTATION

RH Jhoulys Chacín
15 W/3.50 ERA/7.3 K9
RH Chase Anderson
9 W/3.93 ERA/1.19 WHP
RH Zach Davies
2 W/4.77 ERA/6.7 K9
RH Jimmy Nelson
12 W/3.49 ERA/1.25 WHP*

BULLPEN

RH Jeremy Jeffress
15 SV/1.29 ERA/10.4 K9
LH Josh Hader
12 SV/2.43 ERA/15.8 K9
RH Corey Knebel
16 SV/3.58 ERA/14.3 K9

MANAGER

Craig Counsell

*Stats from 2017

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE BREWERS** got within one game of the World Series last season by riding their bullpen. Their starters threw just 847 innings—the fewest of any NL playoff team ever—and they have lost Brent Suter [to Tommy John surgery] and Wade Miley [free agency]. If Craig Counsell is going to use his staff more conventionally this year, he needs a healthy Jimmy Nelson back on the mound. Nelson was having a career year in 2017, with a

3.49 ERA and 199 strikeouts, when he tore his right labrum diving into first base in September. He missed all of '18 after undergoing surgery, and his absence was a big reason Milwaukee leaned so heavily on its pen. Nelson, 29, is the Brewers' only starter who has shown front-of-rotation potential, and having him take the ball 25 times and throw 160 innings is the key to their repeating as NL Central champs.

3

Phillies CONTENDERS SCOUT'S TAKE

➤ **KEY QUESTION** He has the potential to hit 45, 50 homers in Citizens Bank Park, but I do worry about Bryce Harper. Hitting coach John Mallee is a big launch-angle guy, and Harper has a violent swing. Will it clash with that approach? And when he goes bad, those fans will turn on him. They can be brutal.

➤ **UNDERRATED** My first report on Aaron Nola compared him with Greg Maddux: He has unbelievable poise and feel. He doesn't have Justin Verlander's stuff, but he can be just as dominating because his command is off the charts.

➤ **BUST CANDIDATE** Three years ago he was mentioned with Manny Machado, Kris Bryant and Nolan Arenado, but now Maikel Franco is nowhere near that class. He had some holes, pitchers exploited them, and he needs to lose weight.

➤ **LAST LICKS** Gabe Kapler was Dr. Frankenstein—it was ridiculous how much he micromanaged. . . . GM Matt Klentak did a great job this winter. Getting Jean Segura was a good deal, and sneaking in J.T. Realmuto was a *really* good deal. David Robertson adds bullpen depth, and you need that with this lunatic manager.

LINEUP

LF Andrew McCutchen

.255/20 HR/.424 SLG

SS Jean Segura

.304/.341 OBP/.415 SLG

RF Bryce Harper

.249/34 HR/.496 SLG

1B Rhys Hoskins

.246/34 HR/96 RBI

C J.T. Realmuto

.277/21 HR/74 RBI

CF Odúbel Herrera

.255/22 HR/.420 SLG

3B Maikel Franco

.270/22 HR/68 RBI

2B César Hernández

.253/.356 OBP/19 SB

BENCH

IF/OF Scott Kingery

.226/.267 OBP/.338 SLG

OF/IF Roman Quinn

.267/.324 OBP/.420 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

After setting a career high in homers (15) with 19 SBs, CÉSAR HERNÁNDEZ's numbers should rise in the improved Philly order.

ROTATION

RH Aaron Nola

17 W/2.37 ERA/0.98 WHP

RH Jake Arrieta

10 W/3.96 ERA/1.29 WHP

RH Nick Pivetta

7 W/4.77 ERA/10.3 K9

RH Vince Velasquez

9 W/4.85 ERA/1.34 WHP

BULLPEN

RH David Robertson

5 SV/3.23 ERA/11.8 K9

RH Seranthony

Dominguez

2.95 ERA/0.93 WHP/11.9 K9

RH Héctor Neris

5.10 ERA/1.30 WHP/14.3 K9

MANAGER

Gabe Kapler

2019 MLB PREVIEW **NL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

➤ **NO MANAGER** is under more pressure than Gabe Kapler. In his rookie season he implemented a number of analytically informed ideas, from aggressive shifting to chasing platoon advantages in save situations to all but eliminating sacrifice bunts by anyone but pitchers. His willingness to buck convention was assailed by the media, by the fans [who booed him at the home opener] and even by his No. 2 starter, Jake

Arrieta. Kapler's case wasn't helped by a late-season free fall from the top of the division to under .500 in just six weeks. Now, he has been gifted five All-Stars: catcher J.T. Realmuto, shortstop Jean Segura, reliever David Robertson, and a pair of former MVP outfielders in Bryce Harper and Andrew McCutchen. The expectations in Philly are higher than they've been since 2011. If the team doesn't meet them, the blame will fall on Kapler.



OVER
UNDER

➤ **86.5**

The winner of the Bryce Harper sweepstakes did more than any other team to improve itself over the offseason. The Phillies are the favorite in the NL East.



Cardinals CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** The back end of the bullpen has a lot of upside—but a lot of questions, too. Jordan Hicks was lights-out last year, but can he handle the pressure of the ninth? Andrew Miller's spring velocity has been good, but he's thrown a lot of stressful innings over the last few years and tailed off in 2018. They need him healthy.

> **OVERRATED** Miles Mikolas went to Japan, and now he's a strike-throwing machine. That's great, but he doesn't strike anyone out and doesn't deserve the \$68 million they gave him for a good year.

> **MOST OUT OF TALENT** You look at Matt Carpenter, and you think nothing of the guy—you turn around, and he's got another 30 home runs. Two strikes, he fouls the ball off all day long. You worried about the shift with him, but he cut down on his ground balls to become an MVP candidate.

> **LAST LICKS** Paul Goldschmidt slots perfectly into this lineup. Busch Stadium is tough on righthanders, but there isn't a ballpark that can contain this guy. . . . They remind you of past Cardinals teams in that they do the little things right, but they don't quite have the starting pitching to match up with the NL elite.

LINEUP

3B Matt Carpenter
.257/36 HR/.523 SLG

SS Paul DeJong
.241/19 HR/.433 SLG

1B Paul Goldschmidt
.290/33 HR/.533 SLG

LF Marcell Ozuna
.280/23 HR/88 RBI

RF Dexter Fowler
.180/8 HR/.298 SLG

C Yadier Molina
.261/20 HR/74 RBI

2B Kolten Wong
.249/9 HR/38 RBI

CF Harrison Bader
.264/12 HR/15 SB

BENCH

IF José Martínez
.305/17 HR/83 RBI

IF Jedd Gyorko
.262/11 HR/346 OBP



THE PAYOFF PITCH



FANTASY BREAKOUT

With an elite slider and a near 30% strikeout rate in his age-22 season, JACK FLAHERTY looks like the Cards' next ace.

ROTATION

RH Miles Mikolas
18 W/2.83 ERA/1.07 WHP

RH Jack Flaherty
8 W/3.34 ERA/10.8 K9

RH Adam Wainwright
2 W/4.46 ERA/1.46 WHP

RH Michael Wacha
8 W/3.20 ERA/7.6 K9

BULLPEN

CL Jordan Hicks
6 SV/3.59 ERA/8.1 K9

LH Andrew Miller
4.24 ERA/1.38 WHP/11.9 K9

RH Alex Reyes
0.00 ERA/0.61 WHP/17.2 K9*

MANAGER

Mike Shildt

*Minor league stats

> **THE KEY** to the Cardinals' failure to make the playoffs the last two years has been the health of righthander Alex Reyes. A top 10 prospect heading into 2017, Reyes underwent Tommy John surgery that February. Then, returning in 2018, he threw just four innings in the majors before tearing his right lat, ending his season. Reyes would have been a huge boon to a bullpen that struggled down the stretch and as the club missed the postseason

for a third straight year. While St. Louis has improved its relief corps by adding lefty Andrew Miller, a healthy Reyes has the potential that few pitchers on this staff can match. Reyes, 24, has a mid-90s fastball and a devastating slider, and he could be a dominant reliever for three months, then become the Cards' best starter. His health is the biggest factor in the Cardinals' attempt to chase down the Cubs and Brewers.



Cubs **CONTENDERS**

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** There are a lot of great players on this team, but Kris Bryant is the most important. He wasn't healthy last year—he was trying to hold on with his bad shoulder, and it resulted in that one-armed release. His swing looks closer to what it was two years ago, but can Bryant get all the way back to MVP form?

> **GETS MOST OUT OF TALENT** Kyle Hendricks has the Greg Maddux approach down pretty well: He's not lighting up any radar guns—he topped out at 88—but this guy can flat-out paint. He's got a great mind for pitching that no one else in the league can match.

> **OVERRATED** Yu Darvish clearly has No. 1 starter stuff, but he's fallen flat in L.A. and now Chicago; maybe he's just not cut out for a big market. Between him and Tyler Chatwood, the Cubs really whiffed on their big starter signings from last year.

> **LAST LICKS** Javy Báez's instincts on the field are just off the charts. Is there a player who's more fun to watch? ... They've made some big deadline deals recently, but they don't have many more big chips to trade. They're going to get beaten at the deadline by teams that can offer more.

LINEUP

2B Ben Zobrist

.305/9 HR/.378 OBP

3B Kris Bryant

.272/13 HR/.460 SLG

1B Anthony Rizzo

.283/25 HR/101 RBI

SS Javier Báez

.290/34 HR/21 SB

LF Kyle Schwarber

.238/26 HR/61 RBI

C Willson Contreras

.249/10 HR/54 RBI

RF Jason Heyward

.270/8 HR/57 RBI

CF Ian Happ

.233/15 HR/.353 OBP

BENCH

OF Albert Almora

.286/5 HR/.378 SLG

IF Addison Russell

.250/5 HR/.317 OBP



FANTASY BREAKOUT

IAN HAPP was disappointing last year, but he's only 24. He has 20-20 potential and positional versatility.

ROTATION

LH Jon Lester

18 W/3.32 ERA/1.31 WHP

RH Kyle Hendricks

14 W/3.44 ERA/1.15 WHP

LH José Quintana

13 W/4.03 ERA/1.32 WHP

LH Cole Hamels

9 W/3.78 ERA/1.26 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Pedro Strop

13 SV/2.26 ERA/8.6 K9

RH Carl Edwards Jr.

2.60 ERA/1.31 WHP/11.6 K9

RH Steve Cishek

2.18 ERA/1.04 WHP/10.0 K9

MANAGER

Joe Maddon

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **IT'S RARE** for managers to be cast in a lame-duck role these days, so take the Cubs' decision to not extend Joe Maddon's contract past 2019 seriously. Maddon, who led the Cubs to their first World Series title in a century, has regressed tactically, becoming a push-button operator of his bullpen as the rest of the league moves toward more fluid arrangements. His quirky style off the field may also

be wearing thin as Chicago's young core becomes a *veteran* core. Maddon may be a victim of his own success, raising the expectations during his four-year tenure to the point at which a 95-win season—tying for the best record in the NL though 162 games—can be considered a disappointment by newly spoiled Cubs fans. Despite a championship and two division crowns, Maddon will be managing for his job this season.



**OVER
UNDER**

> **89.5**

The Cubs' core talent is still elite, but with the farm system emptied out and their NL Central rivals improving, the window on the North Side is closing—fast.



LINEUP

RF Adam Eaton
.301/.394 OBP/.411 SLG
SS Trea Turner
.271/.19 HR/43 SB
3B Anthony Rendon
.308/.24 HR/92 RBI
LF Juan Soto
.292/.22 HR/.405 OBP
1B Ryan Zimmerman
.264/.337 OBP/.486 SLG
2B Brian Dozier
.215/.21 HR/12 SB
C Yan Gomes
.266/.313 OBP/.449 SLG
CF Víctor Robles
.288/.348 OBP/.525 SLG
BENCH
C Kurt Suzuki
.271/.332 OBP/.444 SLG
1B/OF Matt Adams
.239/.21 HR/.477 SLG



Nationals CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Who will they be post-Bryce Harper? They have two impact kids, Juan Soto and Víctor Robles, who could be the stars. When I saw Soto last year I told people that he's going to be better than Harper. We hear a lot about Vlad Guerrero Jr., but Soto's only four months older and has already made an impact.

> **UNDERRATED** Anthony Rendon has got a quiet approach, a great gap-to-gap damage guy. He's adjusted to playing third—another guy to step up with Harper gone. He'll be a free agent, and someone asked him about Scott Boras as his agent, and he said, 'Well, Boras works for me.' I love that. He wants to stay in Washington.

> **OVERRATED** Stephen Strasburg shows unhittable stuff some days and then you wonder if you're it's the same guy the next start. You always hoped a little bit of Max Scherzer would have rubbed off on him, but leopards don't change their spots.

> **LAST LICKS** Sitting next to Joe Maddon for 10 years doesn't make you smart. Dave Martinez got outmanaged a lot. . . . Trevor Rosenthal is throwing 99, a big addition to the bullpen. . . . Pitching gives them the edge over Philly, but the window's closing.



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Patrick Corbin's slider just keeps getting better. With plenty of run support in D.C., he'll be an elite pitcher.

ROTATION

RH Max Scherzer
18 W/2.53 ERA/.911 WHP
LH Patrick Corbin
11 W/3.15 ERA/1.05 WHP
RH Stephen Strasburg
10 W/3.74 ERA/10.8 K9
RH Aníbal Sánchez
7 W/2.83 ERA/1.08 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Sean Doolittle
25 SV/1.60 ERA/12 K9
RH Trevor Rosenthal
3.40 ERA/1.20 WHP/14.3 K9*
RH Kyle Barraclough
4.20 ERA/1.33 WHP/9.7 K9

MANAGER

Dave Martinez

*Stats from 2017

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **EVEN AFTER** losing Bryce Harper, the Nationals are still playoff contenders in the NL East, thanks to their front-line pitching talent, especially a star-laden rotation bolstered by free-agent pickup Patrick Corbin. Replacing Harper in the outfield, an undeniably daunting task, will be rookie Víctor Robles. Robles, who missed three months last season with a hyperextended left elbow, has already hit

.277/.337/.506 in two brief stretches in the majors. At ages 20 and 21, he had a .373 OBP in the upper levels of the minors, with 25 steals in just 77 games. Robles is a top 10 prospect with the complete set of leadoff skills: speed, the ability to hit for average and good plate discipline. He also happens to be a plus defensive outfielder, a boon for a Washington team that, partly due to injuries, did a poor job of turning fly balls into outs last season.

EZRA SHAW/GETTY IMAGES (SCHERZER); MARY DECICCO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

LINEUP**RF** Brandon Nimmo

.263/.404 OBP/.483 SLG

3B Todd Frazier

.213/.18 HR/.390 SLG

2B Robinson Canó

.303/.10 HR/.374 OBP

C Wilson Ramos

.306/.358 OBP/.487 SLG

LF Michael Conforto

.243/.28 HR/.82 RBI

1B Dominic Smith

.224/.5 HR/.420 SLG

CF Juan Lagares

.339/.375 OBP/.390 SLG

SS Amed Rosario

.256/.295 OBP/.24 SB

BENCH**IF** Jed Lowrie

.267/.23 HR/.448 SLG

IF Adeiny Hechavarria

.247 BA/.279 OBP/.345 SLG

**THE
PAYOFF
PITCH**

➤ **MOST OF** the pressure in the Mets' clubhouse is on their many new acquisitions, from Robinson Canó to Jed Lowrie to Edwin Díaz and an almost entirely rebuilt bullpen. Their most important player, however, may be a holdover from the frustrating 2018 campaign. Amed Rosario was a top 10 prospect two years ago, but in 200 MLB games, he has hit just .255/.290/.384 with unimpressive defensive numbers at shortstop. Dig in, though, and

you see reasons for hope. Over the final two months of the 2018 season, Rosario hit .284 and stole 15 bases while cutting his strikeout rate. You want to be careful about parsing small samples, but with a young talent—Rosario played all last year as a 22-year-old—that kind of in-season progress is encouraging. New York got much older last winter in an effort to win now; the key to doing so could be the youngest player on the team.

Mets **IN LIMBO****SCOUT'S TAKE**

➤ **KEY QUESTION** You've heard this one before: It's all about the health of the rotation. Everything's good now. Noah Syndergaard hasn't been holding anything back this spring. Zack Wheeler was lights out in the second half. Steven Matz's season last year wasn't a fluke. Can all these guys actually stay healthy?

➤ **UNDERRATED** Maybe he isn't the sexiest player for New York, but Brandon Nimmo has a nice, solid approach that makes him really valuable. He gets on base, and the power spike we saw last year was for real: He started pulling fly balls and the approach worked wonders.

➤ **ON THE CUSP** Even if Pete Alonso starts the year in the minors, he'll be up making a difference at first base sooner rather than later. Dominic Smith has also had a great spring. They can play matchups at first and Smith can play the outfield.

➤ **LAST LICKS** Edwin Díaz is, for my money, the best closer in baseball. Great addition. . . . Jury's still out on Mickey Callaway. He's like Gabe Kapler, coming in with all the answers, but he's still got a lot to learn. And with a new regime in place, I'd be worried about my job security.

**FANTASY
BREAKOUT**

BRANDON NIMMO's .404 OBP was MLB's fourth highest. The power is real too. At 25, the lefty is just going to get better.

ROTATION**RH** Jacob deGrom

10 W/1.70 ERA/0.91 WHP

RH Noah Syndergaard

13 W/3.03 ERA/9.0 K9

LH Steven Matz

5 W/3.97 ERA/1.25 WHP

RH Zack Wheeler

12 W/3.31 ERA/1.12 WHP

BULLPEN**CL** Edwin Díaz

57 SV/1.96 ERA/15.2 K9

RH Jeury's Familia

3.13 ERA/1.22 WHP/10.4 K9

RH Seth Lugo

2.66 ERA/1.08 WHP/9.1 K9

MANAGER

Mickey Callaway

**OVER
UNDER** ➤ **86.5**

New York should avoid repeating a dismal 2018 thanks to new GM Brodie Van Wagonen's aggressive offseason. The issue—as always in Queens—will be health.



LINEUP

LF Ronald Acuña Jr.

.293/.26 HR/16 SB

3B Josh Donaldson

.246/.352 OBP/.449 SLG

1B Freddie Freeman

.309/.23 HR/98 RBI

RF Nick Markakis

.297/.366 OBP/.440 SLG

2B Ozzie Albies

.261/.24 HR/72 RBI

CF Ender Inciarte

.265/.325 OBP/.380 SLG

C Brian McCann

.212/.301 OBP/.339 SLG

SS Dansby Swanson

.238/.304 OBP/.395 SLG

BENCH

C Tyler Flowers

.227/.341 OBP/.359 SLG

IF/OF

Charlie Culberson

.270/.326 OBP/.466 SLG



Braves IN LIMBO

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** They've got as much position player talent as anyone: Freddie Freeman and Ronald Acuña are MVP candidates. But can the starting pitching keep up? Julio Teheran has fallen from ace to innings-eating middle-rotation guy, and as a big velo guy who lost a few ticks off his fastball, I'm not sure he'll be an ace again. And Mike Foltynewicz's right-elbow injury is worse than they want to admit.

> **UNDERRATED** Ender Inciarte is a tremendous defender, and he's a much better hitter than people think. He's one of the few guys left in the big leagues willing to bunt for a hit. He's a very good situational hitter, and he plays a Gold Glove centerfield.

> **BUYER BEWARE** Kevin Gausman is too Louisiana cool: He's not soft, but you'd like to see more of a killer instinct out there. He's got top-of-the-rotation stuff, but he's pitching like a fourth starter.

> **LAST LICKS** Once Acuña realizes he can go the other way consistently, watch out. His talent is out of this world. . . . Brian Snitker and his coaching staff get the most out of the team.



FANTASY BREAKOUT

The focus on OZZIE ALBIES is on his .226/.282/.342 line in the second half. The 22-year-old belted 20 homers before it.

ROTATION

RH Mike Foltynewicz

13 W/2.85 ERA/1.08 WHP

RH Julio Teheran

9 W/3.94 ERA/1.17 WHP

RH Kevin Gausman

10 W/3.92 ERA/7.3 K9

LH Sean Newcomb

12 W/3.90 ERA/1.33 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Aroldys Vizcaíno

16 SV/2.11 ERA/9.4 K9

LH A.J. Minter

3.23 ERA/1.29 WHP/10.1 K9

RH Dan Winkler

3.43 ERA/1.19 WHP/10.3 K9

MANAGER

Brian Snitker

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **AFTER WINNING** their first NL East crown since 2013, the Braves mostly sat on their hands this winter. One addition, Brian McCann, will share catching duties with Tyler Flowers and carry minimal expectations at age 35. The other, third baseman Josh Donaldson, 33, was signed to the biggest one-year deal [\$23 million] in baseball history and is expected to be a linchpin of the offense. Donaldson adds a righthanded power bat to a team that got a lot of its production

from the left side last year. After he got MVP votes in 2017 while hitting .270/.385/.559 with 33 home runs for the Blue Jays, Donaldson's last season was ruined by right-shoulder and left-calf injuries that limited him to 52 games and eight homers. When healthy—and by all accounts he is—Donaldson has been a superstar. Atlanta may well have gotten another MVP candidate, to go with Freddie Freeman and Ronald Acuña Jr., for just a one-year commitment.

KELLY KLINE/GETTY IMAGES (ACUÑA); TONY FIRIOLLO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES



Padres IN LIMBO

SCOUT'S TAKE

- KEY QUESTION** They've got the best farm system in baseball, and their guys are about to make an impact. When does Fernando Tatis Jr. arrive? Whenever service time is up, he'll join the club, but he's absolutely ready. You don't see many 20-year-olds with the raw talent to hit 30 homers—but he is one.
- COMEBACK CANDIDATE** Sometimes there's too much pressure after you sign a big contract, and Eric Hosmer looked like he was pressing [last year], trying to prove that he was worth it. But he's got better protection around him, and he's a true gamer.
- ON THE CUSP** Chris Paddack has got poise beyond his years—he's only 23—and has stuff that just jumps out of his hand: a plus changeup that is filthy because he repeats his delivery so well. It wouldn't shock me if he becomes their ace this year.
- LAST LICKS** I love the Manny Machado signing. I wish he wouldn't have made the "Johnny Hustle" comment because it dents his rep, but he's so special on both sides of the ball. . . . Not often do you see so many young players at so many different positions with the opportunity to take the next step. The hype is real.

LINEUP

2B Ian Kinsler
.240/14 HR/.380 SLG
3B Manny Machado
.297/37 HR/.538 SLG
1B Eric Hosmer
.253/18 HR/69 RBI
LF Wil Myers
.253/11 HR/13 SB
RF Hunter Renfroe
.248/26 HR/68 RBI
CF Franchy Cordero
.237/7 HR/5 SB
SS Luis Urias
.208/.264 OBP/.354 SLG
C Austin Hedges
.231 BA/14 HR/.429 SLG

BENCH
OF Franmil Reyes
.280/.340 OBP/.498 SLG
OF Manuel Margot
.245/.292 OBP/.384 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

In addition to power, FRANMIL REYES, 23, showed discipline, with an impressive 8.4% walk rate as a rookie.

ROTATION

LH Joey Lucchesi
8 W/4.08 ERA/10.0 K9
RH Chris Paddack
7 W/2.10 ERA/0.82 WHP*
LH Matt Strahm
2.05 ERA/0.98 WHP/10.1 K9
LH Eric Lauer
6 W/4.34 ERA/8.0 K9

BULLPEN

CL Kirby Yates
12 SV/2.14 ERA/12.9 K9
RH Craig Stammen
2.73 ERA/1.04 WHP/10.0 K9
RH Bryan Mitchell
5.42 ERA/1.75 WHP/4.7 K9

MANAGER
Andy Green

*Minor league stats

THE PAYOFF PITCH

THE PADRES suddenly have a lot of star power, with Manny Machado in on a 10-year deal and Fernando Tatis Jr., in the wings. After committing more than \$400 million to infielders the last two winters [Eric Hosmer signed an eight-year, \$144 million deal before last season], San Diego needs to find cheap pitching. The Padres have had a bottom-three starting rotation in the NL the last three years. Enter Matt Strahm. Acquired from the Royals at the trade

deadline in 2017, Strahm was mostly a reliever last season, putting up a 2.05 ERA in 61¹/₃ innings. The Padres moved him back to the rotation this spring, and he had 12 strikeouts and no runs allowed in his first nine innings. The 27-year-old righty has the skills to be a top-of-the-rotation starter: He is a four-pitch pitcher who tops out at 93-94 mph, and he held righties to a .149 batting average last year, striking out 29% of the ones he faced.



OVER **76.5**

From 96 losses to the playoffs? Not quite. Manny Machado is a difference-maker, but the Padres are still at least a year away from contention.

10

LINEUP

LF Jesse Winker
.299/7 HR/43 RBI
1B Joey Votto
.284/12 HR/.417 OBP
3B Eugenio Suárez
.283/34 HR/104 RBI
2B Scooter Gennett
.310/23 HR/92 RBI
RF Yasiel Puig
.267/23 HR/ 63 RBI
CF Scott Schebler
.255/17 HR/.337 OBP
SS José Peraza
.288/14 HR/23 SB
C Tucker Barnhart
.248/10 HR/.372 SLG
BENCH
OF Matt Kemp
.290/21 HR/.481 SLG
IF/OF Derek Dietrich
.265/16 HR/.421 SLG



Reds IN LIMBO

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** This isn't a bad club, but it's a weird one. Can Yasiel Puig, Matt Kemp and Sonny Gray get a jolt from a change of scenery? Gray just didn't like the big market. I wouldn't be surprised if he has a career year now that he's away from New York City.

> **OVERRATED** He'll hammer mistakes but good pitching will get Puig out. The Dodgers did a good job utilizing the data and he benefited from that. He sells out for power and takes games off. That's not a good influence on a young team.

> **ON THE CUSP** He's the closer but the Josh Hader-style role fits Raisel Iglesias really well; a guy who can put the fire out when needed. He's versatile, changes arm slots and has a power fastball-slider mix. He has great instincts and feel out there.

> **LAST LICKS** This is a really tough division and they're going to take their lumps. But they've got a nice group of prospects. You can start with Hunter Greene—he is an impact starter. . . . They continue player development at the big league level. I'm convinced David Bell is a perfect fit for that. People speak unbelievably highly of him.



FANTASY BREAKOUT

If **LUIS CASTILLO**, 26, continues his post-All-Star Game roll (2.44 ERA, 0.97 WHIP), he has the potential to be a top 10 starter.

ROTATION

RH Luis Castillo
10 W/4.30 ERA/8.8 K9
LH Alex Wood
9 W/3.68 ERA/8.0 K9
RH Tanner Roark
9 W/4.34 ERA/1.28 WHP
RH Sonny Gray
11 W/4.90 ERA/1.50 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Raisel Iglesias
30 SV/2.38 ERA/10.0 K9
RH Jared Hughes
1.94 ERA/1.02 WHP/6.8 K9
RH Amir Garrett
4.29 ERA/1.29 WHP/10.1 K9

MANAGER
David Bell

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **CINCINNATI** made some splashy additions to its roster this offseason. As important as Yasiel Puig, Alex Wood, Sonny Gray and the rest of the new players will be to that effort, the most important addition may never swing a bat or throw a pitch. The Reds lured Derek Johnson from Milwaukee, where as pitching coach the last three years he helped drop the team's ERA from 4.28 to 3.73. Johnson brought along Chase Anderson, Jimmy

Nelson and Brent Suter as starters for the Brewers; Cincinnati is particularly hopeful that Johnson, who was Gray's pitching coach at Vanderbilt, can save the struggling righthander's career. The 47-year-old Johnson's success running a Milwaukee bullpen that ranked second in the NL last year could carry over as well: The Reds have the raw material [Raisel Iglesias, Amir Garrett, Jared Hughes] to achieve comparable success.

Rockies

CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

➤ **KEY QUESTION** They're going to score, and their rotation made strides last year, but how big of a weakness will the bullpen be? Losing Adam Ottavino is big, and three bad contracts have handcuffed them: Jake McGee, Bryan Shaw and Wade Davis. Shaw used to throw his cutter mid-90s. Now it's 87, 88 and he's not commanding it well.

➤ **UNDERRATED** This is one of the best infields in the league, with Nolan Arenado, Trevor Story and Garrett Hampson. Hampson's got surprising pop, great arm strength and a quick release. With his instincts he could play shortstop.

➤ **ON THE CUSP** The young pitching is impressive. Peter Lambert is next in line: he's got the stuff and the acumen to one day fit into the German Márquez–Kyle Freeland conversation. He's going to start in Triple A, but I think by midseason we'll see him.

➤ **LAST LICKS** Freeland and Márquez's success wasn't a mirage: It's the Bud Black effect. He's the perfect manager there. . . . Charlie Blackmon is a big boy who's lost a step. He shouldn't play center. . . . They've made the postseason two straight years, but a lot broke right for them. That bullpen is going to be an issue.

LINEUP

RF Charlie Blackmon
.291/29 HR/12 SB

1B Daniel Murphy
.299/12 HR/.454 SLG

3B Nolan Arenado
.297/38 HR/110 RBI

LF David Dahl
.273/16 HR/.534 SLG

SS Trevor Story
.291/37 HR/108 RBI

CF Ian Desmond
.236/22 HR/20 SB

2B Garrett Hampson*
.311/10 HR/40 RBI

C Chris Iannetta
.224/11 HR/36 RBI

BENCH

1B Ryan McMahon
.232/5 HR/19 RBI

OF Raimel Tapia
.200/.259 OBP/.480 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Limited by a foot injury, **DAVID DAHL**, 25, played 77 games in 2018. Over a full season, he has 30-homer, 100-RBI potential.

ROTATION

LH Kyle Freeland
17 W/2.85 ERA/1.25 WHP

RH German Márquez
14 W/3.77 ERA/10.6 K9

RH Jon Gray
12 W/5.12 ERA/9.6 K9

LH Tyler Anderson
7 W/4.55 ERA/1.27 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Wade Davis
43 SV/4.13 ERA/10.7 K9

RH Seungwhan Oh
2.63 ERA/1.01 WHP/10.4 K9

RH Scott Oberg
2.45 ERA/0.99 WHP/8.7 K9

MANAGER

Bud Black

* Minor league stats

THE PAYOFF PITCH

➤ **LAST SEASON** the Rockies showed that they could win not by reprising the Blake Street Bombers, but by putting together a young, homegrown starting rotation. The keys to their run to the NL Division Series were Kyle Freeland, 25, and German Márquez, 24, who combined for nearly 400 innings with a 3.30 ERA. The surprise was that Colorado went so far without getting much from 27-year-old Jon Gray, who has the best raw stuff on

the staff. Gray struggled terribly with runners on base (.885 OPS allowed) and in scoring position (.845)—so much so that he was briefly sent to Triple A in June. His underlying numbers, however, suggest that he could still be a star in the making. Gray struck out a quarter of the batters he faced last year and had quality starts in eight of 14 outings after his return to the majors. He'll be the breakout star of the Rockies' rotation in 2019.



OVER > **84.5**

The lineup is formidable [as usual] and, with its promising young starters, the rotation is [for once] full of upside. But a thin bullpen will make reaching 90 wins difficult again.

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Pirates TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Can they change divisions? It's so hard for them to compete in the NL Central, and while they did next to nothing during the offseason, the other teams got better—even the Reds.

> **OVERRATED** Josh Bell is a 5 o'clock hitter: He flashes raw power in BP; game time, it's gone. He's been billed as a power guy but hit 12 home runs while playing *at first base*. He's not a good defender—bad agility, bad footwork. He can't run. He's 26—not a kid anymore. I don't think he's got the ability to get better.

> **GETS LEAST OUT OF TALENT** Gregory Polanco thinks about home runs too much. He was supposed to be a cornerstone of one of the greatest outfielders. He should hit .280 with 25 or 30 homers. Now he's got a bad shoulder—it's always something with him.

> **LAST LICKS** Clint Hurdle is in cruise control. He's too comfortable. He just got a big extension and he knows they're not gonna win . . . For them it's going to be about the development of their young pitchers. But I'm not sure Nick Kingham, Jordan Lyles and Trevor Williams are more than middle-to-low-end rotation guys.

LINEUP

2B Adam Frazier
.277/10 HR/.456 SLG
CF Starling Marté
.277/20 HR/33 SB
LF Corey Dickerson
.300/13 HR/.474 SLG
C Francisco Cervelli
.259/12 HR/57 RBI
RF Gregory Polanco
.254/23 HR/12 SB
3B Jung Ho Kang
.255/21 HR/.513 SLG*
1B Josh Bell
.261/12 HR/.411 SLG
SS Erik González
.265/1 HR/.375 SLG
BENCH
IF Lonnie Chisenhall
.321/1 HR/.452 SLG
IF Colin Moran
.277/11 HR/.407 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

In his first full season as a starter, **JOE MUSGROVE**, armed with one of the NL's best sliders, will thrive.

ROTATION

RH Jameson Tailor
14 W/3.20 ERA/1.18 WHP
RH Trevor Williams
14 W/3.11 ERA/1.18 WHP
RH Joe Musgrove
6 W/4.06 ERA/1.18 WHP
RH Chris Archer
6 W/4.31 ERA/1.38 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Felipe Vázquez
37 SV/2.70 ERA/11.4 K9
RH Keone Kela
3.29 ERA/1.10 WHP/11.4 K9
RH Richard Rodríguez
2.47 ERA/1.07 WHP/11.4 K9

MANAGER
Clint Hurdle

*Stats from 2016



THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **IS IT** time to start lumping Bob Nutting in with cheap team owners like Jeffrey Loria? Last year the Pirates dumped face-of-the-franchise Andrew McCutchen and budding ace Gerrit Cole. This winter they built on an 82-79 season by . . . trading their No. 3 starter, Ivan Nova, and adding a bunch of low-end free agents. All the goodwill of playoff appearances in 2013, '14 and '15 has been squandered as Nutting has refused to raise payroll; Pittsburgh

hasn't ranked above 24th on his 13-year watch. He has paid for that at the gate: Attendance at PNC Park has dropped from 2.5 million in '15 to 1.5 million last year. A newspaper magnate and the 10th richest owner in major league baseball, Bottom-line Bob seems content to lock in a profit based on national revenue and revenue sharing, rather than risk his money trying to build a championship team. The Steel City deserves better.

MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES (ARCHER); TONY FIRIOLLO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

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Diamondbacks TANKERS SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** The first year of the post–Paul Goldschmidt era begins, and how bad will things get? This team has gone from a juggernaut offense to a very light one in a hurry. With Goldschmidt and A.J. Pollock gone, the middle is one of the weakest out there. The rotation is solid, but it's going to have to carry them.

> **UNDERRATED** David Peralta is a grinder, just intense. He came up as a pitcher, was released, went to indy ball and became a position player. He built his body up, and now he's a Silver Slugger. With Goldschmidt gone, he's going to have to be their new leader.

> **ON THE CUSP** Everywhere Christian Walker has been, he's been blocked by a star: Joey Votto in Cincinnati, Goldy in Arizona. He's had a great spring. He's got 70 raw power [on an 80 scale]; with 400 at bats, 25 homers isn't a stretch.

> **LAST LICKS** They need to accelerate their rebuild, and Jake Lamb should be the next guy to go. He struggles against lefties, but he can give a contender some pop. . . . The veterans in the rotation could keep them respectable, but that bullpen is going to blow a lot of leads.

LINEUP

CF Ketel Marte
.260/.14 HR/.437 SLG
3B Eduardo Escobar
.272/.23 HR/.84 RBI
LF David Peralta
.293/.30 HR/.87 RBI
RF Steven Souza Jr.
.220/.309 OBP/.369 SLG
1B Jake Lamb
.222/.307 OBP/.348 SLG
2B Wilmer Flores
.267/.11 HR/.51 RBI
SS Nick Ahmed
.234/.16 HR/.411 SLG
C Carson Kelly
.114/.205 OBP/.114 SLG
BENCH
C Alex Avila
.165/.299 OBP/.304 SLG
1B/OF
Christian Walker
.163/.226 OBP/.388 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

The power he flashed in the minors began to translate last year for KETEL MARTE, who also has 30-SB potential.

ROTATION

RH Zack Greinke
15 W/3.21 ERA/1.08 WHP
LH Robbie Ray
6 W/3.93 ERA/12.0 K9
RH Zack Godley
15 W/4.74 ERA/1.45 WHP
RH Luke Weaver
7 W/4.95 ERA/1.50 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Archie Bradley
3 SV/3.64 ERA/9.4 K9
RH Yoshihisa Hirano
2.44 ERA/1.09 WHP/8.0 K9
LH Andrew Chafin
3.10 ERA/1.34 WHP/9.7 K9

MANAGER

Torey Lovullo

2019 MLB PREVIEW **NL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE DIAMONDBACKS** moved into a rebuild by trading Paul Goldschmidt and allowing Patrick Corbin and A.J. Pollock to leave in free agency. Remaining, however, is their \$35 million man, Zack Greinke. The 35-year-old still has three years and \$105 million left on the free-agent deal he signed before the 2016 season. He's been worth the money so far; he has a 3.53 ERA in 91 starts for the Diamondbacks, and by WAR he's been the eighth-best

starter in baseball since signing. Greinke's career to date [2,663 IP, 187 wins, 3.39 ERA, 61.5 WAR] closely resembles that of another cerebral righthander of recent vintage, Mike Mussina [2,669 IP, 199 wins, 3.53 ERA, 66 WAR through age 35], right down to their both being generally underappreciated. Mussina went on to produce five more years as an above-average starter [4.14 ERA, 17 WAR] and eventually gained election to the Hall of Fame.



**OVER
UNDER**

> **73.5**

The Diamondbacks won 82 games a year ago, but it's reasonable to expect at least a 10-win slide after their winter sell-off.



Giants TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Where's their outfield production coming from? There's not a single established outfielder on this team. They've got Mac Williamson, Steven Duggar and Cameron Maybin running around. No wonder they were bidding on Bryce Harper.

> **OVERRATED** Brandon Belt has had a broken swing from the beginning—the same mechanical swing that he's had from Day One in the major leagues. It's not his fault that they decided to give him a big contract [five years, \$72.8 million] through 2021. Teams have the book on him, and he can't make the adjustments.

> **ON THE CUSP** Dereck Rodríguez has had a chip on his shoulder since he didn't work out as a position player and had to move to the mound. He's the son of Ivan, and you can tell he's been in big league clubhouses his whole life. He wants to dominate every time out.

> **LAST LICKS** Mark Melancon has been a bust. After a ton of injuries, he just can't spin it quite as well. . . . Bruce Bochy should've retired after 2018. He's given them everything that he could. He shouldn't have to be going through a rebuild.

LINEUP

CF Steven Duggar
.255/.303 OBP/.390 SLG

2B Joe Panik
.254/.307 OBP/.332 SLG

C Buster Posey
.284/.359 OBP/.41 RBI

1B Brandon Belt
.253/.14 HR/.342 OBP

3B Evan Longoria
.244/.16 HR/.54 RBI

SS Brandon Crawford
.254/.14 HR/.54 RBI

LF Mac Williamson
.213/.295 OBP/.383 SLG

RF Gerardo Parra
.284/.342 OBP/.53 RBI

BENCH

IF Pablo Sandoval
.248/.310 OBP/.417 SLG

IF Yangervis Solarte
.226/.277 OBP/.54 RBI



THE PAYOFF PITCH



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Out in 2017 after Tommy John surgery, **WILL SMITH** took over as closer in June and went 14 of 18 in save opportunities.

ROTATION

LH Madison Bumgarner
6 W/3.26 ERA/1.24 WHP

RH Jeff Samardzija
1 W/6.25 ERA/6.9 K9

LH Derek Holland
7 W/3.57 ERA/8.9 K9

RH Dereck Rodríguez
6 W/2.81 ERA/1.13 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Will Smith
14 S/2.55 ERA/12.1 K9

LH Tony Watson
2.59 ERA/1.03 WHP/9.8 K9

RH Reyes Moronta
2.49 ERA/1.09 WHP/10.9 K9

MANAGER

Bruce Bochy

> **WHEN THE** Giants hired Farhan Zaidi from the Dodgers, it was an acknowledgement that the organization needed a young, smart head of baseball operations to oversee a rebuild. In four months since taking the job, though, Zaidi has done . . . nothing. He has made one trade, acquiring a reliever [Pat Venditte] who was later designated for assignment. His biggest free-agent signing? Lefty Drew Pomeranz. Zaidi, 42, has yet to move

San Francisco closer to the playoffs in 2019—or in 2022. The Giants' core of Madison Bumgarner, Brandon Belt, Brandon Crawford, and Evan Longoria can't challenge the Dodgers', but it *can* dominate the in-season trade market. A healthy Bumgarner—something we haven't seen for a full season since 2016—could swing any division race. By dealing him this summer, Zaidi will add desperately needed talent to a fallow farm system.

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Marlins TANKERS SCOUT'S TAKE

➤ **KEY QUESTION** As bleak as things are here, there are some talented young pitchers. Do any of them take a big step forward this year? Sandy Alcántara, who came over in the Marcell Ozuna trade, is the pick to break out. He's long and lanky, with an above-average fastball and a good slider. He's got just enough erratic command that he can terrify hitters when they step in the box.

➤ **BUST CANDIDATE** Lewis Brinson was a top 20 prospect entering last season; his stock has cratered. He swings at everything. I don't get it: He's one of the game's fastest players, and he attempted three steals last year. The good news is that, on this team, he'll have plenty of time to figure things out.

➤ **UNDERRATED** The little positive development from last year was Brian Anderson, who gave them quality defense at third and in the outfield. He's got 20-homer potential—a guy they can build around.

➤ **LAST LICKS** You feel terrible for Curtis Granderson and Starlin Castro, having to suffer through this. Castro could be a big trade chip at the deadline. He can still do damage. . . . They're the worst team in the league—and it may not be close.

LINEUP

LF Curtis Granderson
.242/13 HR/.351 OBP

2B Starlin Castro
.278/12 HR/.329 OBP

3B Brian Anderson
.273/.357 OBP/65 RBI

1B Neil Walker
.219/.309 OBP/.354 SLG

RF Peter O'Brien
.273/.338 OBP/.530 SLG

C Jorge Alfaro
.262/.324 OBP/.407 SLG

SS JT Riddle
.231/.277 OBP/.377 SLG

CF Lewis Brinson
.199/.240 OBP/.338 SLG

BENCH

C Chad Wallach
.178/.275 OBP/.267 SLG

IF Martín Prado
.244/.287 OBP/.305 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Acquired from the Phillies for J.T. Realmuto, **JORGE ALFARO**, 25, has 20-homer potential with the everyday job.

ROTATION

RH José Ureña
9 W/3.98 ERA/1.18 WHP

LH Wei-Yin Chen
6 W/4.79 ERA/1.34 WHP

RH Dan Straily
5 W/4.12 ERA/7.3 K9

RH Trevor Richards
4 W/4.42 ERA/1.39 WHP

BULLPEN

RH Drew Steckenrider
5 SV/3.90 ERA/10.3 K9

RH Sergio Romo
4.14 ERA/1.26 WHP/10.0 K9

LH Adam Conley
4.09 ERA/1.09 WHP/8.9 K9

MANAGER

Don Mattingly

2019 MLB PREVIEW **NL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

➤ **BEFORE DEREK** Jeter was a surefire Hall of Famer, he was a rookie hitting a soft .250 in 15 games for the 1995 Yankees. It's helpful to remember that he started his MLB career poorly, because he's started his ownership career the same way. He is part of a Marlins ownership group that saddled the team with \$400 million in debt to make the purchase. Jeter bollixed the Marlins' teardown, getting minimal return for two NL MVPs and

Marcell Ozuna. The team added just some low-impact free agents over the offseason, and there's little in the farm. Jeter has waved away the team's competitiveness while hyping up the "experience" of attending a game in a ballpark with the league's smallest crowds. Maybe you can pin some of the Marlins' struggles on president Michael Hill, but Jeter has made himself the face of the franchise. The Marlins' success or failure is on him.



**OVER
UNDER**

➤ **63.5**

The Marlins are bad *and* old. They somehow avoided triple-digit losses in 2018; this year, with an even less inspiring roster, they won't be so fortunate.

Mite Makes Right

With his work at second and hitting in the clutch, the 5' 6" Altuve has been an All-Star for five straight years.



Astros

CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Justin Verlander and Gerrit Cole are as good a 1-2 as any, but with Dallas Keuchel gone and Lance McCullers out for the season, how is the rest of the rotation going to shake out? Wade Miley is a lesser version—a *much* lesser version—of Keuchel. Collin McHugh is trying to transition back to starting. They could take a step back here.

> **UNDERRATED** Houston adding Michael Brantley was one of the best under-the-radar signings. After ankle surgery [in 2017] on top of a few shoulder surgeries, you wondered if Brantley would ever be the same guy. But his swing is back, and the dude even stole a dozen bases.

> **ON THE CUSP** Josh James is the x-factor on the pitching staff. He showcased his three pitches in the playoffs, and I love his presence. They won't push him early on, but he's going to be a huge weapon down the stretch and in the postseason.

> **LAST LICKS** AJ Hinch has been the model for managing the bridge between analytics and the players. . . . There's young talent coming, but the scary thing is that their core guys, Carlos Correa and Alex Bregman, are still getting better.

LINEUP

CF George Springer

.265/.22 HR/.434 SLG

3B Alex Bregman

.286/.31 HR/.10 SB

2B José Altuve

.316/.13 HR/.17 SB

SS Carlos Correa

.239/.15 HR/.65 RBI

LF Michael Brantley

.309/.17 HR/.12 SB

1B Yuli Gurriel

.291/.13 HR/.428 SLG

DH Tyler White

.276/.12 HR/.533 SLG

RF Josh Reddick

.242/.17 HR/.7 SB

C Robinson Chirinos

.222 BA/.18 HR/.338 OBP

BENCH

IF/OF Aledmys Díaz

.263 BA/.18 HR/.453 SLG

OF Tony Kemp

.263 BA/.6 HR/.9 SB



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Moving from the bullpen to the rotation, COLLIN MCHUGH will get the run support to pile up the wins and has 200-K potential.

ROTATION

RH Justin Verlander

16 W/2.52 ERA/0.90 WHP

RH Gerrit Cole

15 W/2.88 ERA/1.03 WHP

RH Collin McHugh

6 W/1.99 ERA/0.91 WHP

LH Wade Miley

5 W/2.57 ERA/1.22 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Roberto Osuna

21 S/2.37 ERA/7.6 K9

RH Will Harris

3.49 ERA/1.09 WHP/10.2 K9

RH Héctor Rondón

3.20 ERA/1.32 WHP/10.2 K9

MANAGER

AJ Hinch

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE SELECTION** of Carlos Correa with the first pick in the 2012 draft was a defining moment for the Astros' new front office. Correa shot to the majors in less than three years, won the 2015 AL Rookie of the Year award at 20 and was the shortstop for a World Series winner at 22. So why does he feel so disappointing at 24? Perhaps it's the injuries—a torn left-thumb ligament in '17, a bad back in '18—that have cost him 50 games in each

of the last two years. Perhaps it's the career lows in batting average, homers, OBP and slugging he had in 2018. Perhaps it's the way his speed has vanished and his defense eroded: Correa has just six stolen base attempts and two triples in two seasons, and his numbers at shortstop in '18 [-4 DRS] were his worst ever. When healthy, Correa has shown he can be an MVP candidate—but he needs to stay healthy for a full season.



OVER
UNDER

> **96.5**

With the AL's best starting duo, a lockdown bullpen and Michael Brantley joining the stacked lineup, Houston could top its franchise-record 103 wins set just last season.



Yankees

CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

- > **KEY QUESTION** The one thing that could hold them back is starting pitching, especially with Luis Severino's injury. James Paxton was a great acquisition; Masahiro Tanaka's fastball will still keep you honest. But CC Sabathia and J.A. Happ are over 35—can they keep producing?
- > **UNDERRATED** Yup, I think Aaron Judge is actually underrated. He's much more than big bombs. His patience is impressive; I was amazed how good all his at bats were in the playoffs against Boston. His quiet leadership, doing the right thing all the time, also doesn't get recognized. The total package. And still getting better.
- > **OVERRATED** When I heard they wouldn't trade Gary Sánchez for J.T. Realmuto, I was shocked. Sánchez has lapses of focus defensively and gets into funks offensively. He had a huge first year, and then you saw a lazy, complacent guy.
- > **LAST LICKS** I like the relationship Aaron Boone has with his players. He protects his guys. He's still making mistakes, but I think he'll learn from them. . . . Troy Tulowitzki has lost a step, but his swing looks better, and he's got an 'F you, Toronto' vibe about him that I love.

LINEUP

- CF** Aaron Hicks
.248/27 HR/11 SB
- RF** Aaron Judge
.278/27 HR/.528 SLG
- DH** Giancarlo Stanton
.266/38 HR/100 RBI
- C** Gary Sánchez
.186/18 HR/.406 SLG
- 3B** Miguel Andújar
.297/27 HR/92 RBI
- 2B** Gleyber Torres
.271/24 HR/.480 SLG
- 1B** Luke Voit
.322/15 HR/.671 SLG
- SS** Troy Tulowitzki
.249/7 HR/.378 SLG*
- LF** Brett Gardner
.236/12 HR/16 SB
- bench**
if DJ LeMahieu
.276/15 HR/.428 SLG
- OF** Clint Frazier
.305/11 HR/.562 SLG**



THE PAYOFF PITCH



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Statcast metrics show that LUKE VOIT's power is real. With regular playing time, he has 20 home run potential.

ROTATION

- RH** Masahiro Tanaka
12 W/3.75 ERA/1.13 WHP
- LH** James Paxton
11 W/3.76 ERA/1.10 WHP
- LH** J.A. Happ
17 W/3.65 ERA/1.13 WHP
- LH** CC Sabathia
9 W/3.65 ERA/1.31 WHP

BULLPEN

- CL** Aroldis Chapman
32 SV/2.45 ERA/16.3 K9
- RH** Dellin Betances
2.70 ERA/1.05 WHIP/15.5 K9
- LH** Zack Britton
3.10 ERA/1.23 WHIP/7.5 K9

MANAGER
Aaron Boone

> **THE YANKEES** spent the offseason bolstering their bench and their bullpen, so it was unfortunate that their first major injury came to starter Luis Severino. The righty was shut down early in March with rotator cuff inflammation, and will be out until at least May. While the Yankees can fill his innings with Luis Cessa, Domingo Germán or Jonathan Loaisiga, they don't have anyone on the roster or in the system who has Severino's

stuff or potential to dominate in the postseason. The 25-year-old righthander was among the top 10 in MLB over the past two seasons, when he had the best stretch of any homegrown New York starter since Chien-Ming Wang in 2006 and '07. Even the best option in the free-agent market, Dallas Keuchel, wouldn't replace Severino. He is the one irreplaceable Yankee, and they'll need him to be healthy down the stretch in order to fend off Boston in the AL East.

*Stats from 2017 **Stats from Triple A

OVER 96.5

They didn't seriously pursue Bryce Harper or Manny Machado, but they didn't need to, either. As loaded as their lineup is, it's the bullpen that gives them the edge over the Sox.

3

Red Sox CONTENDERS SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Can they figure out the answer to the eighth and ninth? Craig Kimbrel is a huge loss, but Joe Kelly put up a lot of important innings for this club and he's gone too. Matt Barnes and Ryan Braiser throw hard, have good off-speed pitches, but neither has the lights-out stuff that made the bullpen so good last year.

> **GETS MOST OUT OF TALENT** It all looks so easy for J.D. Martinez, but the guy puts in so many hours in the video room. That's why his approaching is outstanding. You better get the pitch where you want it, because if you don't, he's gonna hurt you. His swing plays perfectly in that park.

> **UNDERRATED** People look at Brock Holt and say: utility guy. He's better than that. He played everything but center and catcher last year, but he'd be a starting second baseman for most clubs.

> **LAST LICKS** Their outfield works so hard at their craft. They've got the whole field covered, especially in Fenway . . . Alex Cora was not a great player himself, but he knows how to handle role players like he was and also the stars. What was so impressive in his first season was that he never seemed to be frantic.

LINEUP

LF Andrew Benintendi
.290/16 HR/21 SB

RF Mookie Betts
.346/32 HR/30 SB

DH J.D. Martinez
.330/43 HR/.629 SLG

SS Xander Bogaerts
.288/23 HR/.522 SLG

1B Mitch Moreland
.245/15 HR/68 RBI

2B Dustin Pedroia
.293/7 HR/.392 SLG*

3B Rafael Devers
.240/21 HR/.433 SLG

C Christian Vázquez
.207/3 HR/.283 SLG

CF Jackie Bradley Jr.
.234/13 HR/17 SB

BENCH

1B/OF Steve Pearce
.284/11 HR/.512 SLG

IF Eduardo Núñez
.265/10 HR/7 SB



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Solid last year as Craig Kimbrel's setup man, **MATT BARNES** is a top 10 closer if he locks down ninth-inning duties.

ROTATION

LH Chris Sale
12 W/2.11 ERA/0.86 WHP

LH David Price
16 W/3.58 ERA/1.14 WHP

RH Rick Porcello
17 W/4.28 ERA/1.18 WHP

LH Eduardo Rodríguez
13 W/3.82 ERA/10.1 K9

BULLPEN

RH Matt Barnes
3.65 ERA/1.27 WHP/14.0 K9

RH Hector Velázquez
3.18 ERA/1.45 WHIP/5.6 K9

RH Heath Hembree
4.20 ERA/1.33 WHP/11.4 K9

MANAGER
Alex Cora

*Stats from 2017

2019 MLB PREVIEW **AL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> LAST YEAR

Xander Bogaerts broke out by slashing .288/.360/.522. This year look 40 feet to Bogaerts's right for the next young Red Sox star. Rafael Devers was disappointing in 2018, with a .298 on-base percentage and playing poor defense at third. Eduardo Núñez, no glove man himself, ate into Devers's playing time in the second half. Still, Devers is just 22 years old, younger than almost every player who got

Rookie of the Year votes in the AL last season. When he hit the ball in the air, he hit it hard: His average exit velocity of 95.4 mph on line drives and fly balls, is in the top 50 among all major league hitters. His strikeout rate of 24.7% is just above average in today's game, and his walk rate of 7.8% was good for a 21-year-old. Devers will take a big step forward in '19 and be a crucial reason why the Red Sox return to the postseason.



OVER
UNDER

> **93.5**

Don't expect 108 wins again, not with a bullpen that has big holes to fill. But the defending champs are so deep in the lineup and the rotation, 95 is well within reach.



LINEUP

CF Kevin Kiermaier
.217/7 HR/10 SB

LF Tommy Pham
.275/21 HR/15 SB

2B Joey Wendle
.300/7 HR/16 SB

DH Avisail García
.236/19 HR/.438 SLG

1B Ji-Man Choi
.263/10 HR/.505 SLG

SS Willy Adames
.278/10 HR/.406 SLG

RF Austin Meadows
.287/6 HR/.461 SLG

C Mike Zunino
.201/20 HR/.410 SLG

3B Matt Duffy
.294/4 HR/12 SB

BENCH

IF/OF Daniel Robertson
.262/9 HR/.415 SLG

OF Guillermo Heredia
.236/5 HR/.342 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Acquired last July from the Pirates, **AUSTIN MEADOWS**, 23, will take over for Mallex Smith and has 20-20 potential.

ROTATION

LH Blake Snell
21 W/1.89 ERA/11.0 K9

RH Charlie Morton
15 W/3.13 ERA/1.16 WHP

RH Tyler Glasnow
2 W/4.27 ERA/11.0 K9

LH Ryan Yarbrough
16 W/3.91 ERA/1.29 WHP

BULLPEN

LH José Alvarado
8 S/2.39 ERA/11.3 K9

RH Ryne Stanek
2.98 ERA/1.09 WHIP/11.0 K9

RH Diego Castillo
3.18 ERA/0.95 WHIP/10.3 K9

MANAGER

Kevin Cash



THE PAYOFF PITCH

► **THE HIGHEST** compliment the Rays can pay a pitcher is that they consider him a starter, as opposed to someone who needs an opening act. Tyler Glasnow, 25, the biggest prize in last summer's Chris Archer trade with the Pirates, is getting that treatment, joining Blake Snell and Charlie Morton in a traditional rotation role. The 6' 5" righthander struck out 28.4% of the batters he faced in 11 starts for Tampa Bay last year and sharply

reduced his walk rate from 13.9% to 8.4% after coming over from the Pirates. Glasnow's fastball averaged 97 mph in 2018—just three pitchers with at least 100 innings threw harder—but he has relied on heat 70.5% of the time in his three major league seasons. He'll need a second pitch to become a reliable starter on the Rays' rotation, let alone take a huge step forward the way Snell did last season, when he won the AL Cy Young in a 90-win season.

JIM MCISAAC/GETTY IMAGES (SNELL); MARY DECICCO/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

Rays CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

► **KEY QUESTION** Will their three-man rotation work? The thing is, it's a good trio: Blake Snell's Cy Young season wasn't a fluke, Charlie Morton has pitched great this spring, and Tyler Glasnow has a lot of ability. After that, it'll be that opener crap again, which I hated, but it worked.

► **OVERRATED** When they added Mike Zunino, I kept reading about how great a hitter he is, but all you have to do is pitch away from him. He wants to launch—he's looking to hit the ball out of the ballpark. *And he's gone backward defensively.*

► **UNDERRATED** Tommy Pham hit a ton better with Tampa than he did with St. Louis. People thought he couldn't do what he did [in 2017] but his second half showed he's an All-Star. He'll get even better because his approach is so good. But a change of scenery also did wonders for him.

► **LAST LICKS** I'd use Ryne Stanek in the back end of my bullpen instead of as an opener. What a waste. . . . They've got some talented young arms in José de León and Brent Honeywell, who have had Tommy John and haven't played. They'll be a big boost for them. . . . This is a playoff-caliber team, but the division is a bear.



Twins CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** A new regime is there with a new approach—can they get the most out of their underperformers? Byron Buxton has all talent in world, but he essentially got the previous regime ousted with how he crapped the bed. Miguel Sanó is always hurt and always fat, but there's hope for Buxton and Max Kepler, who needs to lift the ball with more authority.

> **COMEBACK CANDIDATE** Michael Pineda is gonna be a key for them. He hasn't pitched since 2017 but still has ace stuff with that great slider. He's always better than his ERA; keeping him on the field is the key. With him and José Berríos at the top of the staff, the staff will surprise.

> **UNDERRATED** If Jonathan Schoop gets his hands on the ball, you're out. He had a down year in Milwaukee, but 30 homers is still possible. He and Nelson Cruz were great under-the-radar signings.

> **LAST LICKS** I'm worried about [new manager] Rocco Baldelli. They're all analytics there and have done very little work on fundamentals. If Tom Kelly came back and saw this, he'd throw up . . . With the Indians likely to take a step back, there's a huge opportunity for the Twins.

LINEUP

SS Jorge Polanco

.288/6 HR/.427 SLG

1B C.J. Cron

.253/30 HR/.493 SLG

LF Eddie Rosario

.288/24 HR/77 RBI

DH Nelson Cruz

.256/37 HR/.509 SLG

RF Max Kepler

.224/20 HR/58 RBI

2B Jonathan Schoop

.233/21 HR/.416 SLG

3B Marwin González

.247 BA/16 HR/.409 SLG

C Jason Castro

.143/1 HR/.238 SLG

CF Byron Buxton

.156/0 HR/5 SB

BENCH

IF Miguel Sanó

.199/13 HR/41 RBI

1B Tyler Austin

.230 BA/17 HR/.480 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Last year JOSÉ BERRÍOS began to rein in his potentially elite curveball. With just a bit more consistency, he's a top 20 AL pitcher.

ROTATION

RH José Berríos

12 W/3.84 ERA/1.14 WHP

RH Kyle Gibson

10 W/3.62 ERA/8.2 K9

RH Jake Odorizzi

7 W/4.49 ERA/8.9 K9

RH Michael Pineda

8 W/4.39 ERA/1.29 WHP*

BULLPEN

RH Blake Parker

14 SV/3.26 ERA/1.24 WHP

RH Trevor May

3 SV/3.20 ERA/1.03 WHP

LH Taylor Rogers

2.63 ERA/0.95 WHP/9.9 K9

MANAGER

Rocco Baldelli

*Stats from 2017

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **WITH THREE** rebuilding teams below them and one [maybe] above, the Twins have a chance to steal the AL Central from the defending champion Indians. But that chance hinges on a healthy Byron Buxton. The 25-year-old played only 28 games last season while battling migraines, a broken left toe and a strained left wrist. Minnesota then denied him a late-season return in order to retain control of him through 2022. This spring, though,

Buxton is healthy and playing like the No. 2 pick he was in '12. He has the highest ceiling of any Twin, with speed that makes him both MLB's best defensive centerfielder [saving 24 runs in '17, his one full season] and one of its top base stealers [caught five times in 51 career attempts]. Minnesota has put together a contender through development and free agency. Now they just need Buxton to be their star.



OVER
UNDER

> **83.5**

The Twins lineup has been beefed up, and the rotation boasts surprising depth. The wins will pile up for them in the worst division in baseball.



LINEUP

SS Francisco Lindor
.277/38 HR/25 SB
2B Jason Kipnis
.230/18 HR/75 RBI
3B José Ramírez
.270/39 HR/34 SB
DH Carlos Santana
.229/24 HR/.414 SLG
1B Jake Bauers
.201/11 HR/.384 SLG
RF Tyler Naquin
.264/3 HR/.356 SLG
CF Leonys Martín
.255/11 HR/.425 SLG
C Roberto Pérez
.168/2 HR/.263 SLG
LF Greg Allen
.257/2 HR/21 SB
BENCH
IF Max Moroff
.186/.284/.356 SLG
OF Bradley Zimmer
.226/2 HR/.330 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

JAKE BAUERS doesn't have massive power, but the 23-year-old will drive in tons of runs in this lineup.

ROTATION

RH Corey Kluber
20 W/2.89 ERA/0.99 WHP
RH Carlos Carrasco
17 W/3.38 ERA/1.13 WHP
RH Trevor Bauer
12 W/2.21 ERA/1.09 WHP
RH Mike Clevinger
13 W/3.02 ERA/1.16 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Brad Hand
32 SV/2.75 ERA/13.3 K9
RH Adam Cimber
3.42 ERA/1.24 WHP/7.6 K9
LH Oliver Pérez
1.39 ERA/0.74 WHP/12.0 K9

MANAGER

Terry Francona



THE PAYOFF PITCH

THE INDIANS have quietly built a monster in the AL Central, averaging 96 wins since 2016 in earning three division titles and a pennant. Owner Larry Dolan bumped the payroll to help ensure continued success, from \$118 million in '16 to \$150 million in each of the last two years. His reward? Attendance at Progressive Field fell by 6% last year, despite a lineup with such charismatic stars as Francisco Lindor and José Ramírez and a devastating starting rotation

that has the Indians as contenders again. Some brutal weather in Cleveland early last season hurt, as did the lack of a challenger in the AL Central to make games down the stretch more interesting to fans looking for reasons to tune in. Whatever the reasons, Dolan and the Indians have not been rewarded for their supremacy and their spending. The key for the Indians this year? Their fans, who need to show up in support of what is an entertaining, successful team.

Indians CONTENDERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> KEY QUESTION After they didn't sign anyone despite glaring holes in the outfield and bullpen, you have to ask: If things go bad, will they start selling off pieces like Trevor Bauer and Corey Kluber? The bullpen will be the biggest issue. Brad Hand is a legit closer but Andrew Miller and Cody Allen are big holes to fill.

> UNDERRATED Shane Bieber is up to 97 in spring training and he doesn't walk anybody. He has unbelievable command of four pitches. His breaking ball is getting better. This rotation is stacked: It's a hell of a thing when *this* guy is your No. 5.

> GETS MOST OUT OF TALENT José Ramírez was turned away from workouts in the Dominican Republic because of his size (5' 9") when he was 17. He plays with a chip on his shoulder. He can play anywhere, he'll bunt and he'll hit a three-run homer. An MVP candidate.

> LAST LICKS Triston McKenzie will be the ultimate wild card coming out of the bullpen. He could be used the way the Rays used David Price during their World Series run. . . . Terry Francona is the model manager—there's no one better at combining the old school and new school.

OVER
UNDER

> 90.5

With top-shelf starting pitching, the Indians remain a playoff contender, but their ceiling is lower after a winter in which they failed to fill gaps in the bullpen and outfield.

A's **CONTENDERS****SCOUT'S TAKE**

> **KEY QUESTION** Do they have the rotation to compete? All you need to know is that Mike Fiers is their Opening Day starter. Marco Estrada is a great fit—he'll thrive in that thick air and spacious field. But the pitching depth scares me.

> **ON THE CUSP** Defensively Matt Chapman was the baddest dude out there—call me crazy, but I think he's better than Nolan Arenado. He also showed promise with the bat by going to all fields really well and not falling into the launch-angle approach of lifting everything.

> **UNDERRATED** You can't find five people who thought that Marcus Semien would be an everyday shortstop in the majors for the last six years. Now he's Gold Glove-caliber. He gives all the credit to [third base coach] Ron Washington, and his work ethic is second to none.

> **LAST LICKS** With Joakim Soria the bullpen, which was really good last year, will be even better. . . . There were whispers that the Yankees wanted Bob Melvin last year and the A's wouldn't give him permission. That tells you enough, doesn't it? . . . This team has pride and is well-prepared. They expect to be as good as they were last year.

LINEUP**2B** Jurickson Profar

.254/20 HR/10 SB

3B Matt Chapman

.278/24 HR/.508 SLG

1B Matt Olson

.247/29 HR/.335 OBP

DH Khris Davis

.247/48 HR/123 RBI

RF Stephen Piscotty

.267/27 HR/88 RBI

LF Robbie Grossman

.273/5 HR/.367 OBP

SS Marcus Semien

.255/15 HR/14 SB

CF Ramón Laureano

.288/5 HR/7 SB

C Josh Phegley

.204/.344 SLG/.599 OPS

BENCH**1B/OF** Mark Canha

.249/17 HR/.449 SLG

IF/OF Chad Pinder

.258/13 HR/.436 SLG

**FANTASY BREAKOUT**

Once a top prospect with Texas, JURICKSON PROFAR, 26, set career highs in home runs and RBIs, and qualifies at three positions.

ROTATION**RH** Mike Fiers

12 W/3.56 ERA/1.18 WHP

RH Marco Estrada

7 W/5.64 ERA/1.43 WHP

LH Brett Anderson

4 W/4.48 ERA/1.28 WHP

RH Daniel Mengden

7 W/4.05 ERA/1.11 WHP

BULLPEN**CL** Blake Treinen

38 S/0.78 ERA/11.2 K9

RH Yusmeiro Petit

3.00 ERA/1.01 WHP/7.4 K9

RH Joakim Soria

3.12 ERA/1.14 WHP/11.1 K9

MANAGER

Bob Melvin

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **OAKLAND WENT** 97–65 last season with a rotation held together by chewing gum and children's wishes. Trevor Cahill, Brett Anderson and Edwin Jackson weren't on the A's last March 15, but by year's end they had combined for 54 starts, 282⅓ innings and a 3.83 ERA. Only Anderson returns, which is fine, because Oakland is set to unleash a monster on the mound. Jesus Luzardo, picked up two years ago from the Nats for Sean Doolittle and Ryan

Madson, is the game's top lefty pitching prospect, and he's ready to shed the last word of that descriptor. The 21-year-old has a mid-90s fastball and a plus changeup, and in 2018 he had an excellent ratio of 129 K's to 30 walks at three minor league levels. The A's may keep the 6-foot, 209-pound Luzardo on an innings limit—he's just three years past Tommy John surgery—but he'll be a vital part of their attempt to get back to the postseason.

**OVER
UNDER**> **83.5**

The bullpen and lineup are strong, but the front office's ability to piece together a starting rotation is what could push the club back into the playoffs.

88

LINEUP

RF Kole Calhoun
.208/19 HR/57 RBI
CF Mike Trout
.312/39 HR/24 SB
LF Justin Upton
.257/30 HR/85 RBI
1B Justin Bour
.227/20 HR/.341 OBP
DH Shohei Ohtani
.285/22 HR/.564 SLG
SS Andrelton Simmons
.292/11 HR/10 SB
3B Zack Cozart
.219/5 HR/.362 SLG
C Jonathan Lucroy
.241/4 HR/.291 OBP
2B David Fletcher
.275/1 HR/.363 SLG

BENCH

1B Albert Pujols
.245/19 HR/64 RBI
IF Tommy La Stella
.266/1 HR/.331 SLG



Angels IN LIMBO

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** The clock is ticking on Mike Trout hitting free agency, in 2020, and they're wasting him. This isn't a playoff team with their starting pitching. They signed Matt Harvey and Trevor Cahill, but I don't have faith in either guy. And there's no pitching in the pipeline. If you're Trout, why would you stick around?

> **UNDERRATED** Oakland is really going to miss Jonathan Lucroy. He did a great job with that staff. He lost his power, but commands a staff really well. The Angels got a steal with him, locking him up for two years. He'll really help their pitchers.

> **ON THE CUSP** What Shohei Ohtani showed us last year was just a glimpse—and it was amazing. What was surprising was how well he keeps his hands back and hits the ball the other way. They're taking their time with him because they don't want to jeopardize his future as a pitcher; they'll have to settle for him hitting 30 homers.

> **LAST LICKS** Watching Albert Pujols in the field is painful. He's gimpy but he can still hit. It's sad to see. . . . Brad Ausmus didn't have much success in Detroit, so I'm not sure why they brought him in.



FANTASY BREAKOUT

TYLER SKAGGS set career highs in innings and starts after flashes of potential. He's ready to take the next step.

ROTATION

LH Andrew Heaney
9 W/4.15 ERA/9.0 K9
LH Tyler Skaggs
8 W/4.02 ERA/9.3 K9
RH Matt Harvey
7 W/4.94 ERA/1.30 WHP
RH Trevor Cahill
7 W/3.76 ERA/1.19 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Cody Allen
27 SV/4.70 ERA/10.7 K9
RH Noé Ramirez
4.54 ERA/1.26 WHP/10.3 K9
RH Cam Bedrosian
3.80 ERA/1.39 WHP/8.0 K9

MANAGER
Brad Ausmus

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **MIKE TROUT** isn't just the best player in baseball—he's making his case for being the best player ever. We have a hard time processing that, always placing sepia-toned superstars above the ones we see in HD. Trout, though, is the best player, through age 26, in history, edging out Ty Cobb and Mickey Mantle. Last season Trout set career highs in walks and OBP. He does everything at an elite level—hit, hit for power, run, field, get on base—except throw. He does all

this without a hint of controversy, without ever showing the frustration of being a living legend in centerfield for a team that has made the playoffs just once in his eight years. The Angels have missed the playoffs for four straight seasons and will likely make it five, but they're still the team you watch late at night. No matter which team you root for, take a minute this year to watch Trout. He's our Ruth, he's our DiMaggio, he's our Mays, except he may just be better than all of them.

ROBERT BECK (OHTANI); ROBERT BINDER/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES



Blue Jays IN LIMBO

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** It's all about Vladimir Guerrero Jr. and how soon he'll be ready. He reminds you of a young Miguel Cabrera, Manny Ramírez and Vlad Sr.—you watch in amazement. Hitting's not supposed to be this easy. But there are red flags: His defense needs a lot of work, and unless he takes better care of his body, he might become Pablo Sandoval.

> **OVERRATED** He popped off about not being extended when Luis Severino and Aaron Nola were, but Marcus Stroman is nowhere near their class. He's not big [5' 8" and 180 pounds], and there's always been a lot of torque in how he throws. Once you hurt your leg, you put more strain on your arm.

> **BUYER BEWARE** Ken Giles can be nasty. But he's also nuts. I think you're going to have an explosion where he ends up punching himself in the face.

> **LAST LICKS** Clayton Richard in the AL East? Have fun. . . I'm a really big fan of Bo Bichette. He has a great feel for the game. . . The most important thing for them is to develop their prospects. It's going to be at least a three-year rebuild, but there could be something special at the end of it.

LINEUP

LF Billy McKinney
.252/6 HR/.470 SLG

2B Lourdes Gurriel Jr.
.281/11 HR/.446 SLG

1B Justin Smoak
.242/25 HR/77 RBI

DH Kendrys Morales
.249/21 HR/57 RBI

RF Randal Grichuk
.245/25 HR/.502 SLG

CF Kevin Pillar
.252/15 HR/14 SB

SS Freddy Galvis
.248/13 HR/8 SB

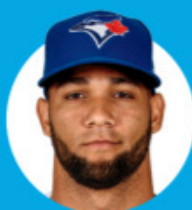
3B Brandon Drury
.169/1 HR/.260 SLG

C Danny Jansen
.247/3 HR/.432 SLG

BENCH

IF/OF Devon Travis
.232/11 HR/.381 SLG

OF Teoscar Hernández
.239/22 HR/57 RBI



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Injuries cost him at bats, but Lourdes Gurriel Jr. showed big power in 65 games. He should be a force over a full season.

ROTATION

RH Marcus Stroman
4 W/5.54 ERA/1.48 WHP

RH Aaron Sanchez
4 W/4.89 ERA/7.4 K9

LH Ryan Borucki
4 W/3.87 ERA/1.32 WHP

RH Matt Shoemaker
2 W/4.94 ERA/1.26 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Ken Giles
26 SV/4.65 ERA/9.5 K9

RH Joe Biagini
6.00 ERA/1.67 WHP/6.6 K9

RH Bud Norris
3.59 ERA/1.25 WHP/10.5 K9

MANAGER

Charlie Montoyo

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE FOCUS** in Toronto is on rookie third baseman Vladimir Guerrero Jr., who will start this season in the minors. Operating in Vladito's shadow, however, is a rookie catcher who deserves some attention. Danny Jansen was a 16th-round pick who spent four years in the low minors without ever hitting a lick. In 2017, however, he broke out with a .323/.400/.484 line across three levels, then followed with a strong season at Triple A [.275/.390/.473].

At a time when catchers are valued for their pitch-framing skills first and everything else second, Jansen, 23, projects as a real offensive contributor, with a batting eye akin to that of his predecessor, Russell Martin. The catch? Jansen allowed 67.2% of base stealers to succeed against him in the minors, and 82.1% in 29 MLB games last season. Improved throwing will make Jansen a huge asset in a league that has many holes behind the plate.



**OVER
UNDER**

> **86.5**

With the Vlad Jr. era set to begin, the future's bright, but for now things will get worse as the Jays wait for their top prospects to mature.

10

White Sox TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Manny Machado would have been great for them, because in 2020 they would have had a chance to compete by building around their young position players. Now what's the plan?

> **ON THE CUSP** After Eloy Jimenez gets his service time in at Triple A, he could be a 30-homer guy right away. He's got huge power to all fields. Unlike a lot of young hitters, he's not a big swing-and-miss guy. This is a future MVP candidate. The Cubs have traded away some good players recently, and this is one they should've kept.

> **BUST CANDIDATE** I like their position players more than their pitching. Carlos Rodón hasn't been what they expected him to be, but a bigger flop is Lucas Giolito. He has command issues, which is a serious problem because he never had a big fastball.

> **LAST LICKS** Rick Renteria is a development guy, good with young players, and I just hope he stays there when they get good and that they don't toss him to the curb like the Cubs did before they turned the corner. . . . They need to add some good pieces to their pitching staff, and once they do, they'll compete. But it's going to be another two seasons, at least.

LINEUP

RF Jon Jay

.268/3 HR/.330 OBP

3B Yoán Moncada

.235/17 HR/12 SB

DH José Abreu

.265/22 HR/78 RBI

1B Yonder Alonso

.250/23 HR/.421 SLG

C Wellington Castillo

.259/6 HR/.406 SLG

LF Daniel Palka

.240/27 HR/.484 SLG

SS Tim Anderson

.240/20 HR/26 SB

2B Yolmer Sánchez

.242/372 SLG/14 SB

CF Adam Engel

.235/336 SLG/16 SB

BENCH

OF Leury García

.271/4 HR/12 SB

OF Brandon Guyer

.206/7 HR/.371 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

With big power and a José Altuve–like 23.6% line-drive rate, **ELOY JIMENEZ** will make an immediate impact.

ROTATION

LH Carlos Rodón

6 W/4.18 ERA/6.9 KP

RH Reynaldo López

7 W/3.91 ERA/1.27 WHP

RH Iván Nova

9 W/4.19 ERA/1.28 WHP

RH Lucas Giolito

10 W/6.13 ERA/6.5 K9

BULLPEN

CL Kelvin Herrera

17 SV/2.44 ERA/7.7 K9

RH Alex Colomé

3.04 ERA/1.18 WHP/9.5 K9

RH Juan Minaya

3.28 ERA/1.46 WHP/11.2 K9

MANAGER

Rick Renteria

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> AFTER ACQUIRING

Manny Machado's brother-in-law, Yonder Alonso, and Machado's close friend Jon Jay, the White Sox failed to land Machado himself. Instead they elected to move Yoán Moncada, the game's top prospect two years ago, to third base from second, swapping him across the infield with Yolmer Sánchez. The absence of Machado, or any big free-agent bat, increases the focus on Moncada. Chicago needs the

23-year-old from Cuba to become the hitter he was projected to be in 2016, when he was the centerpiece of the Chris Sale deal. In his first full season Moncada hit 17 homers, stole 12 bases and drew 67 walks, but his most eye-catching number was 217, his league-high strikeout total. Even in our K-happy era, whiffing 33.4% of the time puts a crimp on offensive value. But because he does so much so well, Moncada could turn into an All-Star with just a small reduction in his strikeout rate.

RON SCHWANE/GETTY IMAGES (MONCADA); NORM HALL/GETTY IMAGES

Mariners

TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** How many more trades is GM Jerry Dipoto going to make? They've turned over their roster—*again*. They were even planning on flipping Edwin Encarnación but couldn't get it done. I can't think fans were happy seeing Edwin Díaz, Jean Segura and Nelson Cruz go. So what's their identity going forward?

> **UNDERRATED** When they got Mitch Haniger from Arizona, it was hard to know what he'd be. He didn't hit homers and wasn't a speed guy. Now he hits for power and is an above-average defender. He's their best all-around player.

> **BUYER BEWARE** Hunter Strickland shows that when you can throw hard and get guys out, teams will give you a chance, especially in this era of bullpen management. But he's an idiot. He punched a wall in San Francisco and broke his hand. He starts fights. He reminds me of Jonathan Papelbon—except he's not as good.

> **LAST LICKS** Yusei Kikuchi's curve drops from the shoulders to the ankles. He's a top-of-the-rotation guy. . . . Robinson Canó was too cool for everyone, and it rubbed off on others; getting rid of him was a step in the right direction.

LINEUP

CF Mallex Smith
.296/2 HR/40 SB
RF Mitch Haniger
.285/26 HR/93 RBI
DH Edwin Encarnación
.246/32 HR/.474 SLG
3B Kyle Seager
.221/22 HR/78 RBI
1B Ryon Healy
.235/24 HR/.412 SLG
LF Domingo Santana
.265/5 HR/.412 SLG
C Omar Narváez
.275/9 HR/.429 SLG
SS Tim Beckham
.287/12 HR/.374 SLG
2B Dee Gordon
.268/4 HR/30 SB
BENCH
1B/OF Jay Bruce
.223/9 HR/.370 SLG
C David Freitas
.215/0 HR/.312 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

New Mariner YUSEI KIKUCHI, 27, amassed a 2.81 ERA, 1.17 WHIP and 925 strikeouts in a little more than 1,000 innings in Japan.

ROTATION

LH Yusei Kikuchi
14 W/3.08 ERA/1.03 WHP*
RH Mike Leake
10 W/4.36 ERA/1.30 WHP
LH Marco Gonzales
13 W/4.00 ERA/1.22 WHP
RH Félix Hernández
8 W/5.55 ERA/1.40 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Hunter Strickland
14 S/3.97 ERA/7.3 K9
LH Roenis Elias
2.65 ERA/1.22 WHIP/6.0 K9
RH Cory Gearrin
3.77 ERA/1.34 WHIP/8.3 K9

MANAGER
Scott Servais

*2018 Japan Pacific League

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE MARINERS** have taken a step back, shipping off Robinson Canó, James Paxton and Edwin Díaz in an effort to build a team that can eventually break MLB's longest postseason drought. Individual story lines, rather than team ones, will carry the day, and there's no bigger story in Seattle than Félix Hernández. Once on a Hall of Fame track, the King found himself banished to the bullpen last

summer in the middle of a playoff race. Hernández's ERA rose to a career-high 5.55 in 2018. His stuff is gone; of 75 MLB pitchers who threw at least 150 innings last season, just four had a slower average fastball than Hernández's 89.3 mph. With the playoffs unlikely, however, there's value in giving the fans something for which to cheer: a franchise icon, even in decline, who fills the seats with his hard-core supporters.



OVER
UNDER

> **70.5**

Seattle didn't go with a to-the-studs teardown, which means it should avoid the indignity of 95-plus losses. It's still going to be a dreary season in the Pacific Northwest.

12

Rangers TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

- > **KEY QUESTION** They lost Adrián Beltré, who was the glue. Who's their leader? Elvis Andrus is the biggest name but he needs a change of scenery. Nomar Mazara is an impact hitter in the middle of the lineup; his swing looks like Carlos Delgado's. He's ready to be their new star.
- > **BEWARE OF** Ever since he took a swing at José Bautista, Rougned Odor has looked like he wants to embrace the villain role: unbuttoned jersey, long beard, helmet covering his eyes, always stepping out of the box. It's not helping his game. He's hardheaded and doesn't take instruction well. And it's rubbed off on his approach: He swings way too freely.
- > **ON THE CUSP** Willie Calhoun is going to break out. The problem is where to put him. He's bad at second base. They're trying to hide him in left; all they want him to do is catch the ball and hit the cutoff man. But that little man has some big-time pop.
- > **LAST LICKS** I want José Leclerc on the mound. He'll deceive you to death and is a straight battler. . . . Chris Woodward is the perfect guy for a rebuild. . . . How can you have hope for this team? The staff is full of old guys who have all had Tommy John.

LINEUP

DH Shin-Soo Choo
.264/21 HR/.377 OBP
2B Rougned Odor
.253/18 HR/12 SB
SS Elvis Andrus
.256/6 HR/.367 SLG
RF Nomar Mazara
.258/20 HR/77 RBI
LF Joey Gallo
.206/40 HR/92 RBI
3B Asdrúbal Cabrera
.262/23 HR/.458 SLG
1B Ronald Guzmán
.235/16 HR/.416 SLG
C Jeff Mathis
.200/1 HR/.272 SLG
CF Delino DeShields Jr.
.216/2 HR/20 SB
BENCH
IF Isiah Kiner-Falefa
.265/4 HR/7 SB
OF Willie Calhoun
.222/2 HR/.333 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

JOSÉ LECLERC became the closer last August and converted all 12 of his opportunities while racking up a 38.1% strikeout rate.

ROTATION

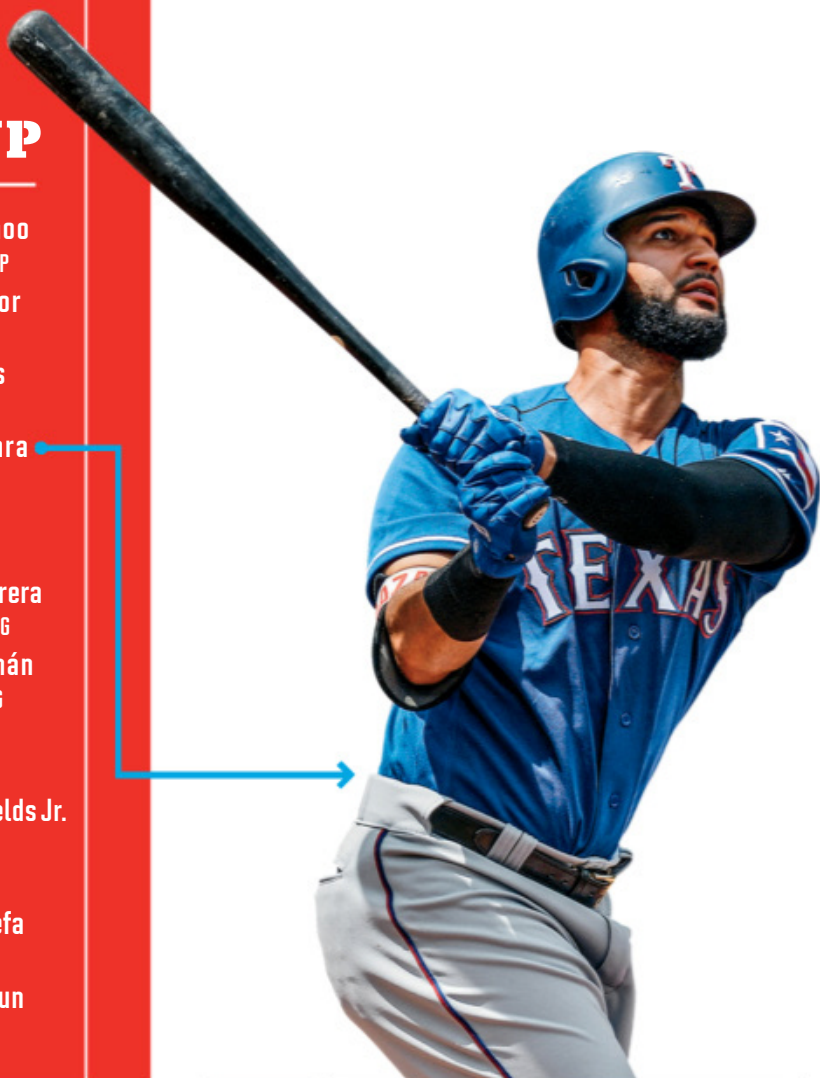
LH Mike Minor
12 W/4.18 ERA/7.6 K9
RH Lance Lynn
10 W/4.77 ERA/1.52 WHP
LH Drew Smyly
7 W/4.88 ERA/8.6 K9*
RH Edinson Vólquez
4 W/4.19 ERA/1.42 WHP**

BULLPEN

CL José Leclerc
12 SV/1.56 ERA/13.3 K9
RH Jesse Chavez
2.55 ERA/1.06 WHP/8.7 K9
RH Chris Martin
4.54 ERA/1.22 WHP/8.0 K9

MANAGER
Chris Woodward

*Stats from 2016 **Stats from 2017



THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THE RANGERS** have finally decided to start over, and since they're also moving into a new ballpark in two years, 2019 is a throwaway season in many ways. While the wins will be scarce, the team has some watchable players, with a speedster in Delino DeShields Jr., a strikeout phenom in José Leclerc and the most extreme three-true-outcome hitter in baseball history in Joey Gallo. At 25, Gallo has had the greatest propensity ever for homers, walks and

strikeouts, keeping the ball out of play 58.3% of the time over his four-year career. He has been an above-average hitter based on the last two seasons even while striking out 403 times—or in 36.3% of his plate appearances, second highest in MLB. When he makes contact, though, look out. Gallo led the majors last year in exit velocity on balls hit in the air and in rate of hard contact. There's no one who epitomizes the trade-offs modern hitters make more than Gallo.

NICK CAMMETT/DIAMOND IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (MAZARA); BEN VANHOUTEN/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

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Royals TANKERS SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** Losing Salvador Pérez [with a right-elbow injury] kills them. He's a big bat in their lineup, but behind the plate he's as valuable as any catcher. How much is it going to set back this young pitching staff? Jake Junis and Brad Keller are so important, it's a shame that they won't have Pérez to guide them.

> **UNDERRATED** He's not José Altuve, but Whit Merrifield isn't far behind. He hits all over the field, doesn't swing and miss much and can stay back on 0 and 2 and go the other way. The way he plays, you can see he just loves the game.

> **ON THE CUSP** He's supremely talented, but there's also such a wide variance in the Adalberto Mondesi who shows up every day. I love the aggressiveness, but he has to contain it; he can run into outs. He doesn't have a plan at the plate. The question is if he can put it all together.

> **LAST LICKS** He's a great players' manager, but Ned Yost is a little too wedded to old conventions. It's become a hindrance that he doesn't embrace the data available to him. . . . They have a ton of high-impact prospects in the minors—2022 is realistic for when they should compete.

LINEUP

SS Adalberto Mondesi

.276/14 HR/32 SB

2B Whit Merrifield

.304/.438 SLG/45 SB

LF Alex Gordon

.245/13 HR/12 SB

1B Ryan O'Hearn

.262/12 HR/.597 SLG

DH Jorge Soler

.265/9 HR/.466 SLG

RF Brian Goodwin

.239/6 HR/.390 SLG

3B Hunter Dozier

.229/11 HR/34 RBI

C Cam Gallagher

.206/1 HR/.250 OBP

CF Billy Hamilton

.236/4 HR/34 SB

BENCH

IF Chris Owings

.206/4 HR/11 SB

OF Jorge Bonifacio

.225/4 HR/.360 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Believe the hype. Over a full season, 22-year-old ADALBERTO MONDESI, has 15-homer, 40-steal potential.

ROTATION

LH Danny Duffy

8 W/4.88 ERA/1.49 WHP

RH Ian Kennedy

3 W/4.66 ERA/1.38 WHP

RH Jakob Junis

9 W/4.37 ERA/1.27 WHP

RH Brad Keller

9 W/3.08 ERA/1.30 WHP

BULLPEN

RH Brad Boxberger

32 SV/4.39 ERA/12.0 K9

RH Wily Peralta

14 SV/3.67 ERA/9.2 K9

LH Jake Diekman

4.73 ERA/1.50 WHP/11.1 K9

MANAGER

Ned Yost

2019 MLB PREVIEW **AL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **COMING OFF** a 100-loss season, it's going to be another long year or three in Kansas City, where the heroes of the 2015 World Series champions have declined [Alex Gordon], moved on [Lorenzo Cain] or are sidelined for the season [Salvador Pérez]. One bright spot, though, for a team that has struggled to develop its own starters is Jakob Junis. The 26-year-old righthander has thrown 275 innings with a 4.35 ERA over the last two seasons, leaning

hard on a slider that he threw just over 40% of the time in 2018. This spring Junis has been working on his changeup to give him a better option against lefthanded batters, who have hit .278 against him while striking out just 18.2% of the time since '17 [as opposed to .251 and 23.2% for righties]. A third pitch could also help solve the problems he's had the third time through the order, when he's been hammered [.303/.354/.534 in his career].



OVER
UNDER > **70.5**

It was going to be grim in Kansas City before Salvador Pérez's injury. Even with MLB's fastest lineup, a second straight year of 100 losses looks inevitable.



Tigers TANKERS

SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** It'll be tough to do because his contract is so big, but they have to move Miguel Cabrera. He can offer a contender a lot: He still hits the ball hard, and you know the moment's never too big for him. The club needs to start cashing it all in and get prospects back for their players. Will they start with Cabrera?

> **BUST CANDIDATE** Everyone used to say, JaCoby Jones needs to play every day. Well, he finally got 430 at bats last year and did nothing with it. His defense is above average, but he hasn't made any adjustments at the plate. At 26, he's not young anymore.

> **ON THE CUSP** He's going to start the year in the minors, but Casey Mize is ready. He's had a great spring: The fastball tops out at 97 and has good feel. If they were contenders, he could break camp with the big league team. Their rebuild is going to start with him.

> **LAST LICKS** Michael Fulmer and Shane Greene are good trade candidates. . . . He's not one of these new-school managers, but Ron Gardenhire is a stable presence who can handle the strange mix of veterans and young guys here.

LINEUP

2B Josh Harrison
.293/8 HR/.363 SLG
LF Christin Stewart
.267/2 HR/.375 OBP
RF Nick Castellanos
.298/23 HR/89 RBI
1B Miguel Cabrera
.299/3 HR/.448 SLG
3B Jeimer Candelario
.224/19 HR/.393 SLG
DH Niko Goodrum
.245/16 HR/12 SB
SS Jordy Mercer
.251/6 HR/.315 OBP
C Grayson Greiner
.219/0 HR/.281 SLG
CF JaCoby Jones
.207/11 HR/13 SB
BENCH
OF Mikie Mahtook
.202 BA/9 HR/.359 SLG
IF Ronny Rodríguez
.220 BA/5 HR/.335 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

With 48 homers over the last two years in the minors, CHRISTIN STEWART has power that will translate to the big leagues.

ROTATION

RH Michael Fulmer
3 W/4.69 ERA/7.5 K9
RH Jordan Zimmermann
7 W/4.52 ERA/1.26 WHP
LH Matthew Boyd
9 W/4.39 ERA/1.16 WHP
RH Tyson Ross
8 W/4.15 ERA/1.30 WHP

BULLPEN

CL Shane Greene
32 SV/5.12 ERA/9.2 K9
RH Joe Jiménez
4.13 ERA/1.20 WHP/11.2 K9
RH Buck Farmer
4.15 ERA/1.56 WHP/7.4 K9

MANAGER

Ron Gardenhire



THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **IT WILL** be a rough year in Detroit, with the Tigers in the second year of a rebuild that is expected to take at least four. There aren't many players with upside here, especially on a pitching staff that was among the league's worst last year, but one hurler getting a lot of helium is Matthew Boyd. The 28-year-old lefthander raised his innings pitched total for the third straight season, with a career low in ERA (4.39) and a career high

in strikeouts (159). He shifted his pitch mix to emphasize his slider more, throwing it nearly a third of the time and more slowly than he had before. The combination is akin to what Patrick Corbin did on his way to a \$140 million payday with the Nationals. Such improvement is a lot to hope for, but a Boyd who takes the ball every fifth day and keeps his ERA around 4.00 will go a long way toward making Detroit respectable.

MARK CUNNINGHAM/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (CABRERA); SCOTT AUDETTE/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

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Orioles TANKERS SCOUT'S TAKE

> **KEY QUESTION** How ugly are things going to get? Guys like Alex Cobb and Andrew Cashner can't get knocked out in the second inning, because there's nothing behind them. The bottom of the rotation is filled by guys who aren't big league starters. They need patience: It'll get *really* ugly.

> **BUST CANDIDATE** We all had high hopes for Dylan Bundy, but in giving up 41 home runs last year, he became way too predictable. He needs to sequence his stuff differently, because he's not the kid who was throwing 100 when he signed.

> **BUYER BEWARE** For some reason Chris Davis won't go back to the hitter he was when he hit 53 homers, stayed on the ball and went the other way. He's making a lot of money, but at some point you just have to say, Get out of our clubhouse.

> **LAST LICKS** DJ Stewart was not a good first-round pick. If you look at his body, he's like John Kruk—he can't play *anywhere* defensively. . . . They're bad, but there's been good energy in camp. Credit Brandon Hyde. He's learned from Joe Maddon and is good with young players. They're going to need all the encouragement they can get.

LINEUP

CF Cedric Mullins

.235/4 HR/.359 SLG

2B Jonathan Villar

.260/14 HR/35 SB

LF Trey Mancini

.242/24 HR/58 RBI

DH Mark Trumbo

.261/17 HR/44 RBI

1B Chris Davis

.168/16 HR/49 RBI

3B Renato Núñez

.258/8 HR/.419 SLG

RF DJ Stewart

.250/3 HR/.550 SLG

SS Richie Martin

.300/6 HR/25 SB*

C Chance Sisco

.181/2 HR/.269 SLG

BENCH

IF/OF Alcides Escobar

.231/4 HR/8 SB

OF Joey Rickard

.244/8 HR/.413 SLG



FANTASY BREAKOUT

Once blocked by Zach Britton and Brad Brach, MYCHAL GIVENS, who thrives by limiting hard contact, is in line for the saves.

ROTATION

RH Dylan Bundy

8 W/5.45 ERA/9.6 K9

RH Alex Cobb

5 W/4.90 ERA/1.41 WHP

RH Andrew Cashner

4 W/5.29 ERA/1.58 WHP

RH David Hess

3 W/4.88 ERA/6.4 K9

BULLPEN

CL Mychal Givens

9 S/3.99 ERA/1.19 WHP

RH Miguel Castro

3.96 ERA/1.45 WHP/5.9 K9

LH Paul Fry

3.35 ERA/1.27 WHP/8.6 K9

MANAGER

Brandon Hyde

*Minor league stats

2019 MLB PREVIEW **AL**

THE PAYOFF PITCH

> **THERE'S NO** good way to spin the Orioles. They were one of the worst teams in baseball history last year at 47–115. Baltimore was the first team to win fewer than 50 games since the 2003 Tigers. There's a good chance they will be even worse in 2019. If you're looking for a reason to tune in, though, there's Richie Martin. The righthanded-hitting Martin was the first pick of the 2018 Rule 5 draft, taken from the A's three years after going No. 20

in the amateur draft. A star at Florida, Martin hit .300/.368/.439 last year at Double A Midland, with 25 steals. He's 24, and thanks to a strong spring, he is likely to beat out Alcides Escobar and start the season at shortstop. Last season, Martin's average jumped from .234 to .300. If Martin is in the season-opening lineup, he'll be the first Rule 5 pick to start on Opening Day since Baltimore outfielder Joey Rickard did it in 2016.



OVER
UNDER

> **60.5**

Under a new manager and a new GM, the O's, after the poorest season in team history, are still in teardown mode. With their fallow farm system, their rebuild will take a while.

BY *DAN GREENE*

ILLUSTRATION BY
*MARK
HAMMERMEISTER*

GETTING SNIPPY

The top battlers for the title will be Johnson (North Carolina), Washington (Kentucky), Hunter (Virginia), Barrett (Duke) and Hachimura (Gonzaga).

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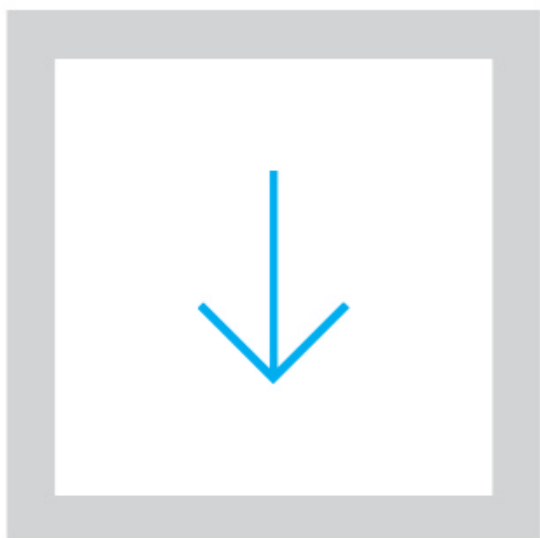
In a season with no truly dominant team,
five have shown the ability to bounce
back from injuries and bad losses,
emerging as the clear favorites to reach
Minneapolis. Which one will wield the
ceremonial scissors on April 8?

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ABOVE

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EVERYONE enters the Madness with scars. After Michigan fell to Wisconsin on Jan. 19, each of the 353 Division I men's basketball teams had at least one loss; entering the NCAA tournament, all have been beaten at least three times. Even the best programs endured notable struggles. Duke treaded water during the six-game absence of the nation's most brilliant star due to the freak explosion of his sneaker. Gonzaga reached No. 1 in the polls two separate times, only to lose twice in a row the first time and suffer a shocking West Coast Conference championship defeat the second. Kentucky began its season by getting the blue blood beaten out of it (118–84 to Duke). In November, North Carolina's performance had its Hall of Fame coach sounding like a despondent talk-radio caller. Virginia conquered everybody but Duke until being upset in the ACC semifinals, conjuring up the Cavaliers' ghosts of Big Dances past.

Yet in the NAAs, the past is not prologue. It's not about who has lost when. It's about who will not lose again. In a season in which the top teams have separated themselves, five have emerged as especially well-positioned to survive the win-or-go-home gantlet. The candidates who just missed this list certainly have strengths. Michigan State might have its best team in years; last spring's runner-up, Michigan, is capable of another Final Four run; Tennessee, after beating Kentucky twice in two weeks, can realistically knock off anybody. But on April 8, when the final horn sounds at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, one member of this quintet is likeliest to be basking in its shining moment, all the hardships drowned in a rain of confetti.





The Favorite

DUKE

Any fears that freshman forward Zion Williamson might not return to his gravity-defying self after a three-week layoff due to a right-knee sprain were put to rest 130 seconds into the ACC tournament quarterfinal against Syracuse. On the Orange's third possession Williamson (*far left*) came up with a steal on the perimeter, accelerated past his flat-footed opponents and launched himself at the rim from 10 feet out. In the wake of the ensuing emphatic dunk, the Blue Devils were back as national title favorites.

As flashy as the flush was, the play began with an illustration of one of Williamson's less-celebrated strengths: his defense. Nimble, intelligent and imposing, the 6' 7", 285-pound Williamson is a disrupter par excellence: He's the only player to have ranked among the ACC's top 10 in both block rate (5.9%, 10th) and steal rate (4.1%, first) this season. Many of those turnovers were tandem efforts with freshman point guard Tre Jones, an outstanding on-ball defender whose pressure forces teams to begin their offense uncomfortably far from the basket, leaving flummoxed ballhandlers vulnerable for pickpocketing by Williamson, who is a key reason that Duke is nearly unstoppable in the resulting fast break.

Having such talented individual defenders has allowed the Blue Devils, who rank sixth in adjusted efficiency on D (per Kenpom.com), to clamp down the old-fashioned way. After coach Mike Krzyzewski began using a 2-3 zone a few years ago to make things easier with freshman-heavy lineups—peaking with Duke's going zone full-time down the stretch last season—he has returned to his traditional man-to-man, using it on 95.3% of half-court possessions, according to Synergy Sports. The country's top player is back at full strength and Coach K's defense is in rare form, which is bad news for the rest of the field.

TELLING NUMBERS

3-3

The Blue Devils' record in games Zion Williamson missed due to injury. They are 26-2 with him.

779

Points for RJ Barrett, breaking Kenny Anderson's ACC freshman record from 1989-90.

30.2

Three-point shooting percentage for Duke, which ranks 339th in Division I.

The Complete Package

UNC

S *tink* was the word North Carolina coach Roy Williams used to describe his team after a 17-point loss at Michigan on Nov. 28—as in, “We stink”—and he didn’t stop there: “Right now my coaching sucks. If you want some positive things, you better go out and find somebody on the street, because I’ve got no positives for me, no positives for my team.”

Three months later, after a 16–2 run through the ACC and Williams’s ninth regular-season title in that conference, it’s harder to say what positives the Tar Heels *don’t* have. Experience? Not only is 6’ 8” senior and 2017 NCAA tournament hero Luke Maye (32, *below*) still in Carolina blue, but the team’s leading scorer, 6’ 9” forward Cameron Johnson (16.9 points), is a graduate student in his fifth year of eligibility. Quality point guard play? Freshman Coby White has taken quickly to the role, ranking second on the team in scoring (16.3) and sixth in the ACC in assist rate (25.5%). Shooting? Johnson makes 46.5% of his threes, White 36.0%. How about size? At 6’ 6.5”, North Carolina is 18th nationally and fourth among NCAA tournament teams in average height. Rebounding? The Tar Heels are top 20 in the nation on

both ends. Depth? Their top reserve, 6’ 6” freshman wing Nassir Little, is projected to be a lottery pick this June.

And yet this blue blood with so much going for it has been relatively overlooked. Perhaps that was because the high-wattage freshman from up Tobacco Road sucked up so much oxygen, or because the team that tied for the ACC’s regular-season title, Virginia, began and then spent the season a few spots ahead in the polls.

One player who might help North Carolina cross the finish line is largely unheralded himself: Kenny Williams, a 6’ 4” senior guard who is a streaky but capable outside shooter and the team’s best, most nettlesome perimeter defender. In the regular-season finale, a 79–70 win over Duke, Williams drew four offensive fouls, including three on the Blue Devils’ top scorer, RJ Barrett. That’s a knack for disruption that can quickly turn an opposing star’s aggression from a positive to a negative.

TELLING NUMBERS

60

ACC wins for Luke Maye (52 regular-season, eight tournament), a school record.

43.5

Rebounds per game, most in D-I. The Heels also rank fifth in adjusted tempo.

61.4

Percentage of UNC’s field goals that were assisted, eighth highest in the nation.





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The Growth Spurt

KENTUCKY

One of the most encouraging signs of the Wildcats' development this season was soundtracked by . . . Florida students? On Feb. 2. in Gainesville, with Kentucky down 11 in the second half, sophomore forward PJ Washington gathered his teammates together during a dead ball and implored them to stop playing selfishly. The Gators' student section, seizing on his obvious frustration, began chanting, "PJ's angry!"

The Wildcats wound up winning 65–54, offering more tangible evidence of what Washington's pep talk suggested: that Kentucky was growing up. On the youngest team in the NCAA tournament field (yes, less experienced than even Duke), whose lone scholarship upperclassman, grad transfer Reid Travis, missed five games with a right-knee sprain, the 6' 8" Washington (*left*) has been the closest thing to a veteran presence.

But he's not the only one to pipe up. In a Jan. 19 win at Auburn, freshman guard Ashton Hagans—a fiery defender whose December insertion into the starting lineup helped transform the Wildcats' SEC-best D—famously called on classmate Keldon Johnson to “wake the f--- up,” sparking Johnson's 20-point effort. Such are the mileposts of the “player-driven teams” that coach John Calipari strives for annually.

Washington's development on the court has been crucial too. Since conference play began he has ascended from one of many options to primary threat, averaging 16.1 points and 6.6 boards against SEC opponents to enter the league's player of the year discussion. (He lost out to Tennessee's Grant Williams.) Calipari, who cites improved conditioning for Washington's breakout, has gained a flexible weapon who can knock down threes (41.9% from behind the arc) while establishing himself as the Wildcats' go-to post option (using 43.5% of the team's post-up possessions). That inside scoring draws attention from the Cats' two best shooters, the 6' 6" Johnson (38.8% from three) and 6' 5" freshman Tyler Herro (37.3%), as well as creating room for the bruising 6' 8", 238-pound Travis, who returned for the SEC tournament. Any of those three could serve as Kentucky's top scorer on a given night, but it's Washington who will most likely be the leading man on any deep run in March.

As Calipari told reporters at the end of January, “I've waited a year and a half for [Washington] to play this way.” Not angry, but better.

TELLING NUMBERS

8

Games (of 16 since Jan. 14) in which PJ Washington has scored more than 20 points.

94.0

Free throw percentage for Tyler Herro (79 of 84), the highest in the nation.

23.6

Percentage of Kentucky's points that come from threes, which ranks 341st in D-I.

IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO BE **UN**BUSTABLE.

The madness has just begun.

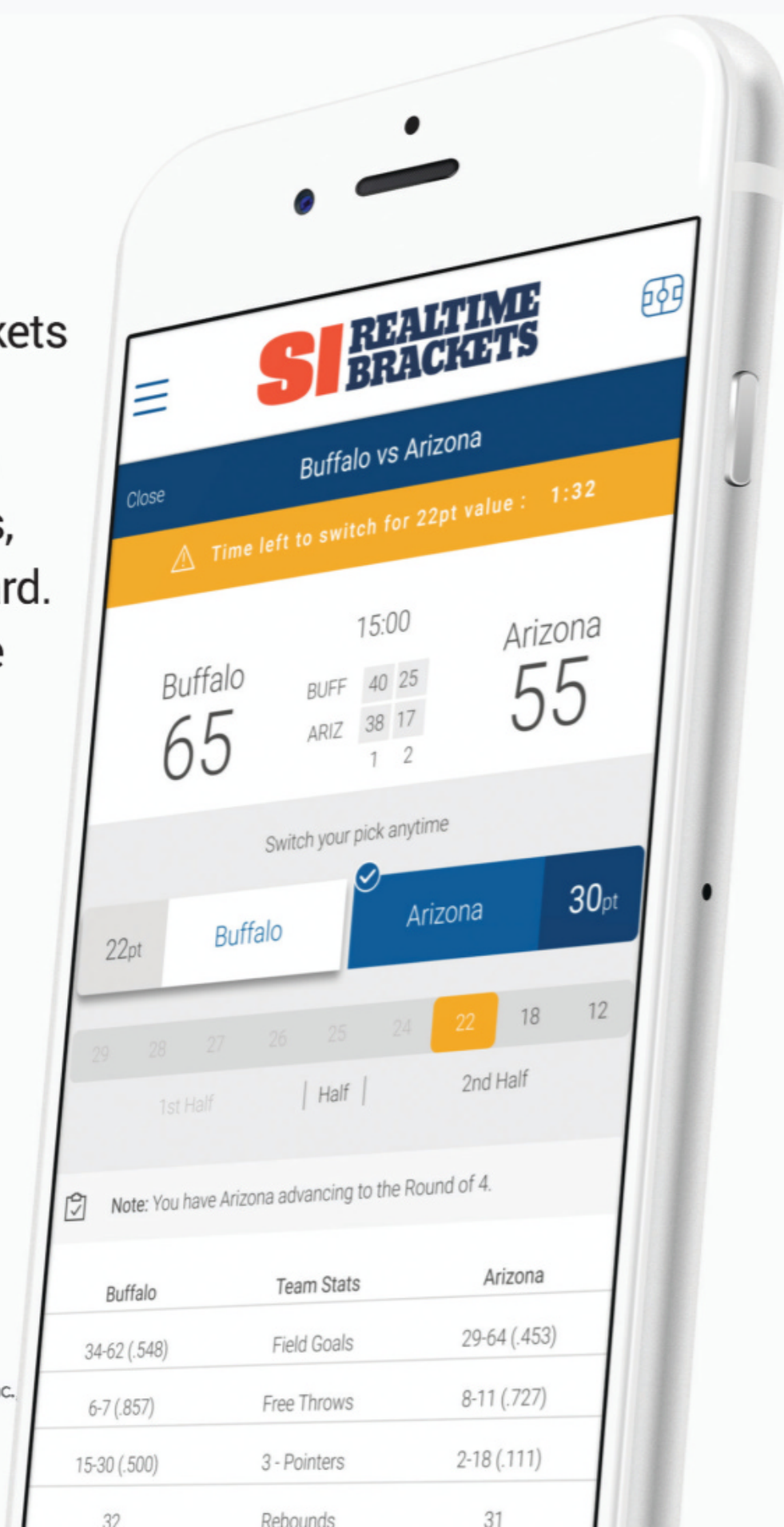
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Buffalo	Team Stats	Arizona
34-62 (.548)	Field Goals	29-64 (.453)
6-7 (.857)	Free Throws	8-11 (.727)
15-30 (.500)	3 - Pointers	2-18 (.111)
32	Rebounds	31

The Outlier

GONZAGA

When the Naismith Hall of Fame released the lists of 10 finalists for each of its five annual position awards in February, most newsworthy was the omission of the best player on the country's top team. Brandon Clarke has defied categorization before. When he was a wiry, 6' 6" nonshooter from Vancouver playing at Desert Vista High in Phoenix, recruiters wondered what role he would fill at the next level. Now two inches taller and more physically developed, the 215-pound Clarke excels as a nebulous, modern four/five, and despite attempting just 14 threes, he has developed a capable jumper.

Consider: According to Sports-reference.com, Clarke's 140.1 regular-season offensive rating ranked first nationally, while his 83.9 defensive rating ranked third; his box plus/minus (18.6) and win shares per 40 minutes (.340) trailed only those of Duke's Zion Williamson. A transfer from San Jose State who sat out last season, Clarke can kiss the rim, and he puts those hops to maximum use. Per Synergy Sports, he ranks in the 97th percentile in scoring efficiency on putbacks (a boon to his second-ranked effective field goal percentage), while ranking 17th in block rate (11.0%) on Kenpom.com. He has also shown a knack for erasing lapses elsewhere from the Bulldogs' D, as about half of Clarke's blocks have come as a help defender. That rim protection, as well as Clarke's versatility, could be especially pivotal for the title aspirations of a team that is stronger on offense (No. 1 nationally in adjusted efficiency) than defense (No. 16, with notable struggles against top-level opponents).

Of course, Clarke is not the only 6' 8", foreign-born, likely first-round pick in the Zags' lineup: Fellow junior Rui Hachimura (21, *right*) of Japan averages 20.1 points and 6.6 rebounds and is on the short list for just about every award. That gives the Bulldogs the kind of versatile, athletic front line that can confound any opponent—Gonzaga remains the lone team to have beaten Duke at full strength, 89–87 on Nov. 21—especially now that 6' 10" junior supersub Killian Tillie returned last week after missing seven games due to a torn ligament in his right foot. Complementing those forwards are a trio of capable shooters, including 6' 3" senior Josh Perkins, the lone remaining starter from the 2017 national runner-up. With a two-way force like Clarke peaking at the right time, this could be the Gonzaga team that earns the kind of prize that's undeniable.



JOHN W. MCDONOUGH



TELLING NUMBERS

60.9

Field goal percentage for Rui Hachimura, 20th in D-I; he has hit 46.9% from three.

21

Consecutive tournament appearances for the Zags, the fifth-longest streak in history.

82.4

Winning percentage for Mark Few, best among active coaches and third all-time.

ANTHONY'S RESTAURANTS



The Question Mark

VIRGINIA

Associate head coach Jason Williford recently shared with some of the Cavaliers an assessment that would surprise most outsiders: This is the loosest he's seen a team play at this time of year.

That statement, from a coach who has been in Charlottesville for 10 seasons, is unexpected for two reasons. The first is that *this time of year*, heightened in import for every team, would seem especially fraught for the Cavaliers, who last March followed frequent postseason underachievements by becoming the first No. 1 seed in 135 games to lose its NCAA opener. Yet, says 6' 5" junior guard Ty Jerome, "we've talked about it so much, and we've learned from it. There's nothing to hide from."

The other? Under coach Tony Bennett, the Cavs have become known for their discipline on both ends of the floor, but this season their methodical attack "feels more fluid," says Jerome, who averages 13.0 points and 5.4 assists. "This is the most freedom we've had in our offense since I've been here." Bennett has given players freer rein in shot selection, as well as installing more ball screens and quick hitters to get scorers into space. The result: an offense ranked second nationally in adjusted efficiency according to Kenpom.com, finally putting it on

par with Virginia's perennially vaunted defense (No. 5). The Cavaliers protect their possessions (the country's 11th-lowest offensive turnover rate), are deadly from three (40.9% as a team, fourth best) and start three players—Jerome, 6' 2" junior guard Kyle Guy, and 6' 7" sophomore wing De'Andre Hunter—whose offensive efficiency ratings are in the ACC's top 13.

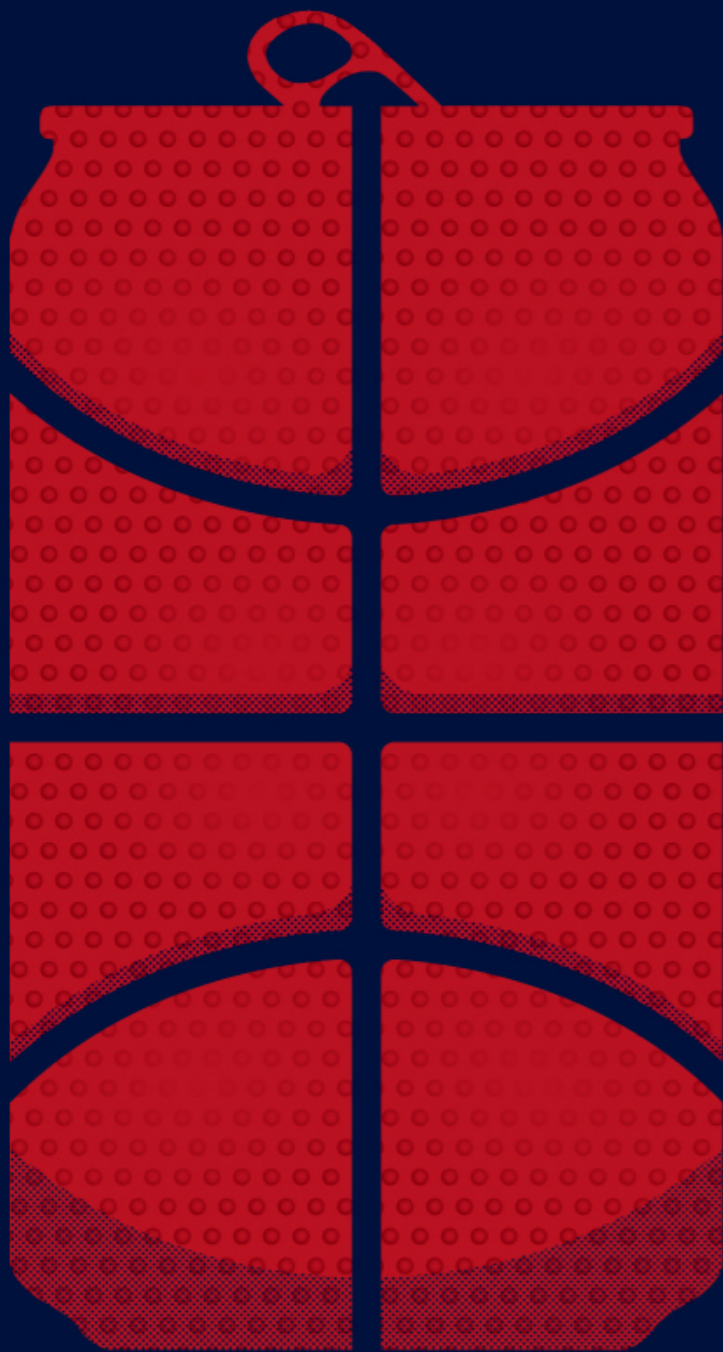
The development of Hunter (12, *above*)—who missed last year's loss to 16th seed UMBC with a broken left wrist—from sixth man to All-America candidate has been a primary catalyst for Virginia's offensive upswing. The 225-pound projected lottery pick is making 45.7% of his threes, and his playmaking has inspired Bennett to draw up a number of isolation plays. "He has that killer mentality this year," Jerome says of his team's leading scorer (15.6 points per game). "That mind-set really changed for him, and that helped all of us." It's helped the Hoos be ready and loose for March, just in time for a run that this time might go the distance. □

TELLING NUMBERS

353
Virginia's rank, out of 353 D-I teams, in adjusted tempo, according to Kenpom.com.

44.1
Career three-point percentage for Kyle Guy, a school record and best in the ACC.

5
Continents represented on UVa's roster. (Only Asia and Antarctica are missing.)



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well before they reach Minneapolis, but nothing can slow
ers a sixth national title to coach Mike Krzyzewski

ACKET

GREENE



TENNESSEE

Junior Grant Williams's versatility helps the veteran Vols break down the Cavs' Pack Line defense.



PURDUE

Junior 6' 1" guard Carsen Edwards breaks out of his slump just in time.



WISCONSIN

Senior Ethan Happ adds another double double to his Badgers record.



NORTH CAROLINA

Freshman Neemias Queta (6' 11", 240 pounds) is a brute force at both ends.

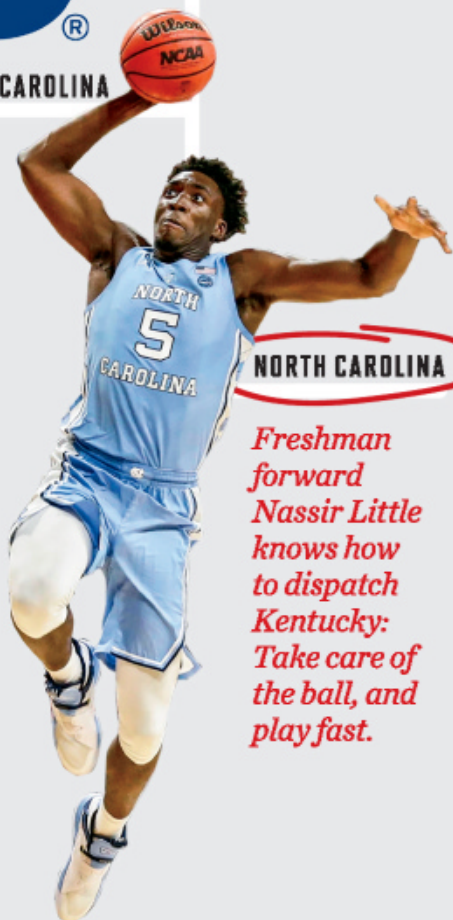
UTAH STATE



AUBURN

Talen Horton-Tucker and the Cyclones ride the momentum of their Big 12 tournament title.

IOWA STATE



NORTH CAROLINA

NORTH CAROLINA

Freshman forward Nassir Little knows how to dispatch Kentucky: Take care of the ball, and play fast.

KENTUCKY

KENTUCKY

VIRGINIA

VIRGINIA 1
GARDNER-WEBB 16

MISSISSIPPI

MISSISSIPPI 8
OKLAHOMA 9

WISCONSIN 5
OREGON 12

KANSAS STATE

KANSAS STATE 4
UC IRVINE 13

VILLANOVA

VILLANOVA 6
SAINT MARY'S 11

PURDUE

PURDUE 3
OLD DOMINION 14

CINCINNATI

CINCINNATI 7
IOWA 10

TENNESSEE

TENNESSEE 2
COLGATE 15

NORTH CAROLINA 1
IONA 16

UTAH STATE 8
WASHINGTON 9

AUBURN 5
NEW MEXICO STATE 12

KANSAS 4
NORTHEASTERN 13

IOWA STATE 6
OHIO STATE 11


HOUSTON 3
GEORGIA STATE 14

WOFFORD 7
SETON HALL 10

KENTUCKY 2
ABILENE CHRISTIAN 15

SOUTH

MIDWEST



ZEN GAME
Despite the pressure of carrying the team, the 5' 10" Durr exudes calm on the court.

BY **BEN BASKIN**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DAVID E. KLUTHO

FIGHT TO THE



*In four seasons at Louisville, **ASIA DURR** has blossomed into a spectacular scorer while advancing ever closer to her dream: the school's first national title. But March can be the cruelest month—and three powerhouses stand in the Cardinals' way*



IT'S A MONDAY in late February, the calendar about to flip to that all-important Month of Madness, and Asia Durr settles into a leather recliner in the front row of a team film room. The Oscars were the night before, but the irrepressible Louisville guard didn't know or care; she hasn't had much time lately for moving pictures that don't show pick-and-rolls. She's been busy.

Busy dropping an ACC-best 21.3 points per game for the No. 3 Cardinals; busy becoming a finalist for the Naismith award; busy cementing her status as the most electrifying player in women's college basketball. Mostly, though, the superstar has been busy on a quest that began four years ago when she became the first No. 1 recruit to commit to Louisville: seizing the school's first national title.

Cardinals coaches call Durr the Quiet Assassin and describe her as the most gifted player they've been around, a scorer of such clinical precision that she takes offense when called a "shooter." Durr has drawn comparisons to LeBron James (for her basketball IQ and ability to dominate), Steph Curry (for her quick release and silky shooting) and James Harden (for her crafty footwork and penchant for hot streaks).

Teammates are so mesmerized by her array of crossovers, step-backs and fadeaways that the coaching staff will sometimes have to remind them to pay attention to the rest of the game, to move without the ball, to *stop staring at Asia*. At times she is less athlete than artist. "It's really like a canvas and she's painting on it," says assistant coach Stephanie Norman. "And I'm not quite sure if the lines are going to go up and down or side to side or go in circles. But when it's all said and done, it's a masterpiece."

When the 5' 10" Durr does something spectacular—like last season against Ohio State, when she dragged off a horn

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screen and nailed a fallaway three with a hand in her face as she fell backward into her own bench—she evinces no emotion, engages in no elaborate celebration. You’ll never see Durr tap three fingers to her head after a made triple like Carmelo Anthony, never see her do the Russell Westbrook three-finger holster. “She has made those shots so many times, it is just normal for her,” notes assistant Sam Purcell. The most you’ll ever get out of her is an occasional fist pump. “I was born to play basketball; it’s my sanctuary, my calming place,” Durr says. “When the ball is in my hands, everything just makes sense.”

What doesn’t make sense to her, though, was how last season ended: with a 73–63 overtime loss to Mississippi State in the Final Four, a game the Cardinals still believe they should have won. Everyone in the program was convinced that 2018 was Louisville’s year to capture that elusive championship, the capstone of a decade-long process. Before the Cardinals hired Jeff Walz as coach in 2007, they had never reached a Sweet 16. He quickly built a perennial contender, with two championship game appearances but no wins. “We were missing that last piece of the puzzle,” Purcell says.

Then came Asia Durr.

WHEN PURCELL first began recruiting Durr, she was an eighth-grader in Douglasville, Ga., and he was an assistant at Georgia Tech. The coach would regularly call her late at night, only to be told that she was in the basement doing biceps curls. After moving on to Louisville in 2013, Purcell continued to recruit Durr, though he didn’t like his chances. At St. Pius X Catholic



POINTS OF PRIDE

On Senior Day, Terry and Audrey celebrated Asia, who in turn dropped a career-high 47 on the Wolfpack.



what made her special. At Louisville she wouldn’t be just *another* alpha. Rather, “she’d be *our* alpha,” Purcell says. The Cardinals wouldn’t just win with her; they would win *because* of her. That pitch, plus the fact that Louisville was within driving distance for her parents, Terry and Audrey, got her to commit.

Just after Durr arrived on campus, though, she had surgery to repair a torn groin and missed the entire preseason. She never regained her form that year, and the Cardinals exited the NCAA tournament in the second round. The following season Durr was back at full strength, earning All-ACC honors and leading Louisville to the Sweet 16. But they could



“I was born to play basketball; it’s my sanctuary, my calming place,” Durr says. “When the ball is in my hands, ***EVERYTHING JUST MAKES SENSE.***”

High, Durr won two Class AAA championships, led the state in scoring average (33.3 points) her senior year and earned MVP honors with the 2013 USA U-16 team that won gold. She could have chosen any Division I program, including those with the championship pedigree the Cardinals lacked.

What Louisville’s coaches could promise, though, was that they would not shackle her creativity or dissuade her from taking the difficult shots that had become her specialty. While other coaches work to persuade All-America talents to adapt their individual styles for the good of the team, Walz assured Durr that her freewheeling spirit was

advance no further, blown out by a Baylor team that was focused on stopping Durr and held her to 28.6% shooting.

When the 2017–18 season began Durr had established herself as one of the best players in the nation, and the team had realistic dreams of making a deep tournament run. “Where are we trying to go?” Purcell would often yell during practice, and the team would shout back, “*Final Four!*” And with Durr averaging 18.8 points as a first team All-America, the Cardinals traveled up I-71 to Columbus.

Then, the heartbreaking loss to Mississippi State, another team that focused on stopping Durr, holding her to 35.3%



from the field. Louisville had a seven-point lead early in the fourth quarter before a cascade of unfortunate events: a dubious technical on center Sam Fuehring that caused her to foul out; a swallowed whistle on a last-second layup try; a buzzer-beating tip attempt that went *inside* the basket before popping back out. The Cardinals scored just one field goal in OT.

The hurt, the sense of opportunity missed, was only exacerbated after seeing Notre Dame, a team the Cardinals had beaten by 33 earlier in the season, shock UConn in the other semifinal. It took Durr months before she was able to watch film of the game against the Bulldogs. “Just painful thoughts,” she says.

The team talked about the game only once, in its first official meeting last fall. The message: *Someone took something from us and now we have to get it back.* But the feeling is always there. Purcell keeps a photograph in his office of the putback that would have sent them to the championship game. In it, the ball is sitting inside the hoop, milliseconds before it would rattle around the rim and slip out. It serves as a constant, tacit reminder of how close the Cardinals were to a title and the need to finish what they started.

I**T’S FEB. 26,** and Louisville is preparing for a clash with No. 10 North Carolina State in two days. Purcell stands at midcourt and explains the plays he’s drawn up to counter the Wolfpack’s likely plan for stopping Durr. Opponents’ strategies are similar: Never switch off Durr on screens or dribble hand-offs, never leave her to help a teammate, always limit her touches. Focusing too much on Durr is dangerous, though,

The Favorite

BAYLOR

The Bears enter the tournament as the top seed and the only team with just one loss (68-63 to Stanford, on Dec 15). Led by 6' 7" senior center Kalani Brown, a Naismith player of the year candidate, Baylor is long, strong and deep, able to bully opponents in the paint, control both backboards, lock down defensively and share the ball better than any team in the country.

Brown (*below*) has been an absolute menace in all phases of the game, averaging 15.7 points on 62.3% shooting and 1.15 points per possession, 12th best in the nation. She also blocks 1.5 shots. Her dominance is all the more impressive considering that she is always double- and often triple-teamed. Brown provides an interior presence that no team—other than Mississippi State, with 6' 7" Teaira McCowan—can duplicate.

The Bears have balance, with four players averaging more than 11 points and eight with at least 10.2 minutes. Behind Brown, Baylor can lean on 6' 4" junior forward Lauren Cox (8.2 rebounds, 2.5 blocks), who has helped the Bears become an elite defensive team. They allowed only 54.5 points per game, the 10th lowest in the nation, and ranked first in defensive rebounds (32.6), total rebound rate (60.9%) and blocks (7.1). From the backcourt, 5' 8" grad student Chloe Jackson and 6' 1" DiDi Richards control the offense, averaging 5.4 and 4.0 assists, respectively, for a team that scored 70.5% of its points off passes (fourth in D-I).

Baylor's one weakness: foul shooting. They made 67.1% from the line, which ranked 247th in the nation. (Brown was by far their best free throw shooter, at 81.6%.) Still, the high quality of their defense should be enough to carry them to their first title since 2012.



as the Cardinals have plenty of other weapons to use on Senior Night against a conference rival. Senior point guard Arica Carter is tough, gritty and a reliable three-point shooter (40.0%). Fuehring, a 6' 3" senior and the team's emotional leader, contributes 10.2 points and 7.2 rebounds. Off the bench, the Cardinals bring 5' 6" sharpshooter Dana Evans and physical 6' 4" junior Kylee Shook. It's a roster that can push and run and score as well as any in the country. But still, the Cardinals know they can only go as far in the NCAA tournament as Durr can take them.

This year they haven't employed any pithy sayings or emphatic chants to express their goals. Louisville doesn't need that anymore. Last season was all about celebrating milestones: most wins (36) in program history, first ACC tournament championship, first No. 1 seed in an NCAA bracket. More ground has been broken this year. In January the Cardinals beat Connecticut—the team that had defeated them in both of their title game appearances—for the first time in 17 tries. But with that victory came no added sense of accomplishment. It was expected, and it wasn't enough. Another Final Four berth is no longer enough, either.

After the Mississippi State loss Durr took the advice of a school guidance counselor and the team's sports psychologist and began to meditate regularly. Every day she'll either listen to Deepak Chopra's soothing voice remind her how strong she is as she takes deep breaths, or play a calming

STRENGTH AND NUMBERS

Recruiters often had trouble reaching Durr because she was doing biceps curls in her basement.



soundtrack as she falls asleep. It's her way of finding the same feeling of zen off the court as she does on it. She was carrying so much of the team's burden on her shoulders, and coaches say her mind was the last part of her game that needed to improve.

During her first three seasons, if Durr didn't play up to her standards—even if the team won—she wouldn't be able to eat afterward. She'd stay up at night wondering what

JOHN AMIS/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (TURNER)

Reigning Champs

NOTRE DAME

After hitting two game-winning buzzer beaters, the hero of the 2018 Final Four, Arike Ogunbowale, entered the season with more eyes on her than any player in women's basketball. She has not disappointed fans. The 5'8" senior guard poured in 21.0 points per game,

averaged a career-best 3.9 assists and set the Irish scoring record with 2,471 points.

Four fellow starters also scored in double figures for a team that led the nation with 89.0 points per game. Jessica Shepard, a 6'4" senior forward became just the second player in program history (after

Ruth Riley) to surpass 2,000 points and 1,000 rebounds. She also triggered the transition offense with her deft outlet passing. Both she and Brianna Turner—a 6'3" All-America center who missed last year's championship run with a torn left ACL—are able to switch seamlessly between the high and low post, pounding opponents in the paint. Turner (right) ranked 11th in the nation with 2.6 blocks per game;





went wrong. This year she is more at peace. She has come to understand that even after an off day, her connection with the ball will always return. More than ever, she is prepared physically and mentally for March.

Before a crowd of 10,602 at KFC Yum! Center, the Wolfpack did everything the Cardinals coaches envisioned they would. They tried to double Durr, to stop her from getting the ball and to swarm her whenever she had it in her hands. Not that it mattered. Durr dazzled, tying her career-high with 47 points in what would be a 92–62 win. For the majority of the game she had more points than N.C. State’s entire team. She scored from deep with rainbow-arching threes, from mid-range with slashing drives into the lane and from close with balletic finishes at the rim—at one point combining all three by faking a deep shot, crossing up a defender with a series of moves that sent her stumbling backwards and then driving hard to her right only to stop and

swish a step-back, 18-footer.

On the court after the game, cameras focused on Durr as the P.A. announcer declared that her 11 three-pointers had set an ACC record. “Wow,” Durr mouthed to herself, the only celebrating she had done all night. Then thousands of fans cheered, some holding cardboard cutouts of her face, as the artist silently stood in her sanctuary contemplating her latest masterpiece. □

GREG NELSON (COLLIER)

her 87 were 65 more than anyone else’s on the roster.

Marina Mabrey was forced to take over the point last season, improving her playmaking dramatically even as she set the all-time Notre Dame record for three-pointers (560). At 6 feet, Jackie Young is often overlooked, but she’s a ruthlessly efficient scorer capable of going for 20 at any time.

The Irish can be soft defensively: They

allowed 64.0 points per game, which ranked 170th in the nation. Chemistry has also been an issue, with so many stars seeking touches. But their depth allows them to play fast (with a four-guard lineup) or physical (adding 6’ 3” sophomore forward Mikayla Vaughn). Even more important, Notre Dame is the most battle-tested team in the field, having lost only one key contributor to last year’s title run.

The Underdog?

UConn



he Huskies were

uncharacteristically mortal this season, with—gasp—two losses.

(Before Baylor’s 68–57 win on Jan. 3, UConn’s last regular-season defeat came on Nov. 17, 2014.) But Geno Auriemma, he of the 11 NCAA titles and two Olympic gold medals, is still the coach, and he has one of the most talented rosters in the country, led by 6’ 2” forward Napheesa Collier (*below*) and 6’ 3” guard Katie Lou Samuelson. Both senior leaders are finalists for the Naismith trophy, making UConn the only school with two players among the 10 candidates. This dynamic duo has been spectacular all season, averaging 20.9 and 18.9 points, respectively, and using more than 50% of the team’s possessions. Samuelson has proved to be one of the most dangerous scorers ever from deep: With 368 three-pointers, she’s just 30 shy of Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis’s program and NCAA record. Collier has been a revelation as a senior, not only on the offensive end (with 20 double doubles and five games of more than 30 points) but also defensively. She led the team in blocked shots (47), ranked second in steals (49) and earned AAC player and defensive player of the year honors. (Samuelson missed the AAC tournament because of a lower back injury but is expected to return for the Big Dance.)

Consistency and depth are issues, though:

Freshman 5’ 11” guard Christyn Williams erupted for 28 points in the 89–71 win over Notre Dame on Dec. 2, but hasn’t scored more than 20 since. And the bench contributed just 9.3 points.

At least 6’ 4” freshman forward Olivia Nelson-Ododa is hitting her stride. She entered the starting lineup after Samuelson was injured, and in a 92–65 win over East Carolina in the AAC quarterfinals, had six points, 17 rebounds and five blocks.



POINT AFTER

LIP SERVICE

SHANE BATTIER

THE TWO-TIME NBA CHAMP'S ANNUAL KARAOKE CHARITY EVENT, BATTIOKE, HAS RAISED MORE THAN \$1 MILLION FOR UNDERSERVED YOUTHS SINCE 2010

► INTERVIEW BY ROHAN NADKARNI
MORE AT SI.COM



SI: Do you blackmail your teammates? What's your pitch to get guys involved?

SB: We appeal to the altruistic bone in everybody: Don't think of this as exposing your lack of vocal talents. Think of this as doing something great for some amazing kids in a way that's fun and slightly embarrassing.

SI: When did the idea for Battioke first pop into your head?

SB: I actually borrowed the idea from an old teammate, Ray Allen, when he played in Seattle. His was more of a concert. He had Brian McKnight coming in, and guys singing karaoke. And I thought, "Wait a minute, *that* should be the headliner!"

The funny part about Battioke is, no one wants to sing first. "I don't want to do a song, and I just want to sit, and watch and laugh." All of a sudden, someone goes up and breaks the ice. Then they want to see the songbook. By the end, we have guys

literally fighting for the mike. It's like going to a sixth-grade dance. No one wants to dance, but once someone gets on the dance floor, everyone wants to boogie.

SI: Do you have a karaoke strategy?

SB: My strategy is, I always sing the first song, to set the bar so low, so no one feels bad about singing after me.

SI: What are some of the most memorable performances?

SB: Chris Bosh doing "You're the First, the Last, My Everything," by Barry White. CB is hilarious, so he stuffs a pillow under his shirt, he's wearing a Jheri curl wig and some kind of fu manchu mustache, so he looks like an over-the-hill lounge singer. And he just absolutely crushes it.

James Jones—who actually can sing, he's got an amazing set of pipes—did the "Thong Song" by Sisqo and actually colored his hair silver and went all out.

SI: I always look forward to the videos.

Has the social media aspect changed anything about Battioke?

SB: Athletes now, they know every public move is more or less broadcast. Which is good or bad. No one is going to go up there and sing a song that would make their grandmother blush. But it's a chance for the players and celebrities to go up there and show people that they're human and real. It shows they are as bad at karaoke as everyone else.

SI: Do you have a white whale?

SB: Let's see. I've had LeBron, D-Wade, Chris Bosh. I had Yao Ming come, but he never sang. I love Darius Rucker; I would love to do a duet with him. I've had Jimmy Buffet onstage. I've been pretty blessed to have some big names. I would love to do a duet with Beyoncé, like every other red-blooded male in the world. Beyoncé, if you're reading this, you have an open invitation to Battioke whenever you want. □



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